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The Brothers Johnson: The Lincoln Motion Picture Company, Black Business, and the Negro Image During the Progressive Era

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The Brothers Johnson: The Lincoln Motion Picture Company, Black Business, and the Negro Image During the Progressive Era

by

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Abstract

The Brothers Johnson: The Lincoln Motion Picture Company, Black Business, and the Negro Image During the Progressive Era

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This dissertation looks at the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, the first filmmaking concern owned and operated by African Americans with the intention of producing dramas depicting the race in a positive fashion. By undertaking a micro-level inquiry of the LMPC the study provides an unusually detailed assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of a Progressive-Era black entrepreneurial endeavor whose national reach had macro-level economic and cultural effect within the African-American commercial realm. On the micro-level, the dissertation adheres to the Cole model of entrepreneurial history by addressing the family, social, and employment backgrounds of the two brothers who owned and operated the film venture, Noble and George Johnson. The dissertation therefore includes notable attentions paid to the business experiences of a third brother, Virgel, and their father, Perry. The family's deeply rooted ethos of self-reliance through business intertwines with their search for spaces affording the opportunity to deal with wealthy whites and vibrant black communities. The importance of black geographic and economic mobility during for burgeoning establishment of a sense and practice of a black economic and cultural nation is thereby highlighted. The business history inquiry into the

organizational and operational specifics of the LMPC provides an informative bedding for the second prong of the study's thrust, explicating the ways that the businesses of Noble and George Johnson can be seen as modes of a nationally-projected production of the social and cultural knowledge of race. That line of questioning is enhanced by the family's history with racial ambiguity and the search for access to white wherewithal. On this front those businesses are vetted as chapters in the African-American tradition of modern public storytelling aimed at forwarding the advancement of the race's bids for full citizenship and material well being by strategically demanding the recognition of black humanity. Theses storytelling businesses were important links in a tradition which had profound effects on African-American life and constituted discursive practices which help us to see the multi-faceted, even contradictory, pull within the experience of blackness in America, a basis of identity seeking likeness and difference, domains of blackness and the freedom to move beyond black.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Barack Obama, delivered a speech on March 18, 2008, which sought to address his connection to Reverend Jeremiah Wright, an African-American community and religious leader from Chicago who was known to have made forceful condemnations of American foreign policy, the most volatile of which laid at least some of the blame for the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, at the feet of the United States. Such criticisms were received as near treason and Obama, a long-time parishioner at Wright's church and a junior Senator from Illinois trying to keep the upward momentum of his bid for the presidency, feared that his campaign might be badly damaged by being associated with such inflammatory sentiments.

The oration, dubbed the 'A More Perfect Union Speech,' focused on finding commonalities between white and black America while explaining the uneasiness of the American experience with blackness and the African American position of being part of and at the same time profoundly at odds with their own country and its legacy of anti-black racism. A portion of the speech referred to a story he had included in his book, *Dreams for My Father*, which dwelt on being in Reverend Wright's church for the first time and, taken up both emotionally and intellectually by the swelling rhythms of the experience, he began to think of

> the stories of ordinary black people merging
> with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and the Pharaoh,
> the Christian's in the Lion's Den, Ezekiel's field of dry bones.
> Those stories – of survival, freedom, and hope – became our
> story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the
> tears our tears; until this black church, on this bright day,
> seemed once more a vessel carrying the story of a people into

> future generations, and into a larger world. Our trials and triumphs at once became unique and universal, black and more than black.[1]

This passage from the speech not only tries to rehabilitate Wright by making his church the locus of a transcendent Christian moment that was meant to connect with audiences across bounds of race, it also provided a concept of the African-American experience and identity as being distinct and yet like everyone else. In short, Obama attempted to frame both blackness and the race's anger toward injustice in America as expressed in Reverend Wright's church in terms of a universal humanity struggling to overcome, a struggle that was not unlike biblical stories of heroic travails which tended to encourage a reading of black struggle as one shared by all. 'Black and more than black.'

Still, in the midst of this call for unity and recognized sameness and humanity, there was the unmistakable suggestion that blackness was an incomplete state of being, one which had connections to humanity but which required movement toward and the embrace of something 'more than black' if that humanity was to be fully realized in the American setting.[2] The 'A More Perfect Union' speech is part of a tradition of African American storytelling aimed at describing for black and white audiences alike the

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[1] Barack Obama, 'A More Perfect Union,' in T. Denean Sharpley Whiting, ed., *The Speech: Barack Obama's 'A More Perfect Union Speech'* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Bloomsbury, 2009), p. 241.; Obama, *Dreams for My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Crown, 1995 (2004)).

[2] It is important to note here that my use of the term 'blackness' refers to the intersection where ideas of race and ideas of cultural practice meet to produce an outlook on the breadth of African-American experience in the United States. This is not a comment addressing pigmentation in and of itself or even those cultural practices that can be thought of as 'black.' Rather, 'blackness' is here a reference to the cultural construct which relates pigmentation to cultural practice, which is to say blackness as a concept of race.

experience of being black in America, stories which wish to broaden the definition of blackness in this country and therefore involve the intersection of class, race, and nation.

For instance, nearly one hundred years before Obama's speech W.E.B. Dubois, one of history's foremost intellectuals regarding race, famously noted that the turn of the 20th Century found American negroes struggling with a psyche curiously split along the fault line of American-ness and blackness. Dubois described in his landmark work *The Souls of Black Folk* a 'twoness' or 'double-consciousness' which was chiefly attributable to the intractable difficulty Negroes were then facing when trying to manage both being black and finding a place of belonging in an America deeply poisoned by anti-black sentiments.[3] The problem of his time was the notion of a divide between people, 'the color line,' which was in part represented by the 'veil,' an opacity which arose along the lines of race to obscure the likeness of 'heart life and longing' shared by both whites and peoples of color.[4] Upon initially discerning the veil DuBois felt anger and disdain for the other side, but this attitude waned as he realized that he continued to have a need to access aspects of the life lived on the other side.[5] This reads as a desire to develop a more complete self that 'double-consciousness' thwarted. Part of his strategy was to tell stories of blackness in America of which *The Souls of Black Folk* was one, stories which would, as Paul Gilroy has described, provide for black modernity 'new analytical languages and procedures.'[6]

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[3] W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1903 (1996)), p. 5.
[4] Ibid, p. 4, regarding the concept of the veil and the sentiments of likeness hidden by the veil; p. 13 regarding the color line.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 114.

The obvious points of connection between the 'A More Perfect Union' speech and DuBois' explanation of the veil and the doubleness of being black in America make it clear both that, in the midst of being alike and yet different, the establishment of a sense of a unified, complete black humanity and identity has been a central issue for African Americans for decades, likely centuries, and that storytelling about blackness in America has been a chief strategic approach to trying to expand definitions and imaginings of that blackness. Further, these stories have tended to involve attempts to move beyond difference, to take hold of the dividers and manipulate them in ways that open paths to better lives and well being.

This dissertation seeks to look at this storytelling and identity formatting tradition as it intersects with a key area of the African-American experience with belonging and material well being: black entrepreneurial effort. The primary subjects of this study are Noble and George Johnson, with some attention paid to their father and older brother Virgel, all entrepreneurs whose racial mixed-ness or ambiguity and desire to manage the greatest levels of material success available led them to seek out interactions with whites and access to whiteness. Raised in Colorado Springs, Colorado where their father, Perry Johnson, trained and raced horse for wealthy whites, the Johnson boys grew up in an environment wherein blackness, while not equal of rights and material comfort, nonetheless enjoyed some access to productive relations with whites, especially for George, who lived with a well-off white family until the age of twelve.

The family moved about the nation during the early years of the 20th Century, often heading in opposite directions, looking for opportunities to settle into areas of notable

economic growth which also offered energetic black communities and business prospects that might be enhanced by interactions with white elites in settings which were not oppressed by hardline racist attitudes. Virgel, who was light-skinned enough to pass for white, did so and moved to Little Rock, Arkansas where he had a run of successful construction businesses. George went to college and then met with his father for a period spent in Tulsa and Muskogee, Oklahoma where he ran a weekly newspaper and real estate endeavor. He then moved to Omaha, Nebraska and finagled a position with that city's post office, the first of his race to get a clerking slot with that entity.

Noble moved about the country taking odd jobs that ranged from cook, to cowboy, to boxer and he eventually caught the attention of a film-making crew. After wowing them with his skills as a horseman and his comely physical stature, he became and actor, writer, director, and producer of film during the early-Hollywood period. Racially ambiguous in appearance, he seldom played a Negro role. As a producer he and a white cameraman with whom he was friends began the first African-American film company aimed at creating titles that presented the race in a positive, dramatic light, the Lincoln Motion Picture Company. The LMPC spearheaded the race film movement of the Progressive Era and, bringing George on to act in numerous capacities, including the booking manager, the Company went national with its product and thereby took part in the expanding reach of black business as it developed during the time of the Great Migration, the massive movement of blacks from the South to the urban centers of the North during World War I. George then ran a news service, the Pacific Coast News Bureau, for several years following

the LMPC's closure and thereby continued to provide stories about the black American experience to mass market outlets through 1927.

My dissertation will rely on the perspectives on business that privilege the seismic innovations that occur at the entrepreneurial level. That branch of business history is classically represented by the school of study flowing from Joseph Schumpeter and Arthur Cole, the latter of whom embeds entrepreneurial studies in the social agar of the decision-makers. The Cole model uses multi-disciplinary angles to ferret out how successful businesses operate and flourish.[7] Cole's approach speaks most effectively to the range of this study's focus, especially his ideas regarding 'meso-economics,' which place much of the meaning of entrepreneurial endeavor in the spaces of inter-relation between micro- and macro levels of the economy, between the small-business owner and larger conglomerations or industries. Johnathan Hughes described Cole's conceptions of the business goings on in that broad interstitial space as the growing of income and opportunity through enhancing economies of scale via small innovations in the infrastructure of the entrepreneurial world of contacts, advertising, marketing, and assorted services.[8] In short, Cole saw the webbing created by entrepreneurs as indispensible to the growth of healthy economic systems because information sharing and retrieval was essential to the change necessary to keep economies robust.

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[7] See Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1942) and Arthur Cole, *Business Enterprise in Its Social Setting* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1959).

[8] Johnathan R. T. Hughes, 'Arthur Cole and Entrepreneurial History,' *Business and Economic History*, Vol. 12 (1983), pp. 133-144, 140,141.

With that model in mind, this Dissertation also sets out to answer Juliet E. K. Walker's call for more sophisticated inquiries into the history of black entrepreneurship with special note of her desire to expand 'the recovery of the identity of African-American businesspeople.'[9] By taking Cole's 'meso-economic' approach to studying entrepreneurial ventures and emphasizing the production modalities of the social and cultural knowledge understood as race I have been able to look at the Johnson family's social history, especially their ginger relationships with race and racial ambiguity, as the setting which gave rise to later business endeavors. The organizational and operational aspects of those ventures provide detailed information regarding both how the black business experience of the Progressive Era managed material production and the creation of the aforementioned social and cultural knowledge of race, including perceptions of sameness and difference. In that way this study seeks to provide a unique look at the formation of racial identity, its influence on business, and the ways that a business of national scope interacts with and speaks to the project of providing more accurate pictures of blackness and black humanity.

A number of studies have focused on the overall phenomenon of African-American culture industries from the turn of the 20th Century to bring out how blacks negotiated a racist, segregationist society to build a sub-nation that made room for black agency and care of the community via the provision of services and goods that were not consistently available from the larger society. Some concentrate on an industry, as Tiffany M. Gill's *Beauty Shop Politics* does, and others look at various aspects of African-American

[9] Juliet E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), p. xvii.

commercial enterprise over a range of business endeavors as they take place in particular urban settings, such as Davarian Baldwin's *Chicago's New Negroes*, or Adam Green's look at black culture in that city, *Selling the Race*.[10] My dissertation plugs into those important works by taking a family history through the micro level of business study and toward a macro level of effect while also invigorating the address of the aspects of black agency that sought to strategically engage whiteness and the mechanics of race, especially where the relations of business and concepts of black humanity were concerned. The building of a national identity is herein more intimately connected with the construction of a national business orientation and practice.

The story of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company is widely known on a cursory level and has largely been subordinated to studies looking at the films of the more productive Oscar Micheaux.[11] This study thereby provides a revisionist treatment of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company that greatly expands that story and its historical importance while also looking at the details of business and cultural production, including raced cultural knowledge. As a result, this dissertation also adds to the important fields of study regarding blacks in film as it provides an unusual look into the business aspect of a field

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[10] Davarian Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Tiffany Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Illinois, 2010); Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[11] See Ronald J. Green, Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000); the best treatments of the LMPC can be found in Jane Gaines, *Fire & Desire: Mixed Race Movies in the Silent Era* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2001) and, less analytically oriented, Patrick McGilligan, *Oscar Micheaux: The Great and Only* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

that has overwhelmingly been concerned with addressing the image of blackness on the screen and the looking relations that derive therefrom, though there are also studies that combine looking at black migration, the creation of cultural centers and spaces, and the ways that black film going practices reflect those experiences. I am here thinking of Jacqueline Najuma Stewart's *Migrating to the Movies.*[12]

The first chapter focuses on the family relations amongst the Johnson men and their early history with business endeavor. The desire to interact with white wherewithal leads them to travel about the country and the chapter demonstrates both a sense of race that is ambivalent about being constructed and constricted as black while also seeking out black areas for business opportunities. These examples of black geographic and economic mobility are key underpinnings to any understanding of the business practices of the family and offer insight into a budding sense of American-ness, of America as a hold for a black national reach. Virgel Johnson's life is considered as a way of fully fleshing out how race affected opportunity and as a way to more completely capture the Johnson family outlook on race and its connection with material well being and business.

The second and third chapters look closely at the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, it's structures and operational methods. These entries provide a detailed assessment of how the company sought to reach a nationwide populace of blacks and thereby gives an indication of both the mechanics of a business with limited access to the appropriate financing required for the film industry and the nuts and bolts of grounding the expanse of a growing, national business presence in the African-American community. These chapters

[12] Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2005).

respectively set out the rise and fall of the LMPC and help to clarify the strengths and weaknesses of the black business model which stemmed from the limited options presented in an era of heavy segregation. Also important to these chapters are the investigation of how ideas of black identity and solidarity played into the business model, a point of entry into inquiries regarding the cultural and social effects of business in general and the race film industry in particular. The third chapter ends by looking at Noble Johnson's career in Hollywood, which further explicates the limits of race-based approaches and the dynamics of Noble's celebrity in two racially separate mass media realms. The first three chapters can be read as a sort of suite that covers the depths of the Johnson family business history.

The fourth chapter begins the dissertation's drive to more effectively connect the storytelling aspects of Noble and George's businesses with the African-American traditions of discussing blackness in America in order to expand and deepen the range and meaning of blackness. It is here that the fullest meaning of the Johnsons efforts to sell a truer vision of the race is most fruitfully exercised. Four of the film synopses connected with the Lincoln catalogue are given a close reading and the cross section of race, racial ambiguity, class, and hunger for material well being and human recognition are set out as they arise in the films. This chapter looks at the core of what the Lincoln Motion Picture Company was selling and offers an exegetical coverage of the stories that provided grist for the appetite that black spectators had for images that represented their experiences, intentions, anticipation, and designs on America. The experience of being a viewer of others and self is considered in the context of film theory so that the meaning of the

Lincoln films as entertainment can be more fully grasped as a tonic for the black self and its position relative to a public image abused by or absented in standard Hollywood output. Key to this chapter is the LMPC's handling of difference and similarity between blacks and whites, along with the Company's efforts to articulate how those dynamics effected where blacks fit into America. The fourth chapter also looks at the storytelling of George Johnson's Pacific Coast News Bureau to obtain our deepest treatment of the Johnson position regarding mastery as a way of building business, material well being, and expanded spaces of belonging.

The fifth and final chapter seeks to place the Johnson's storytelling businesses explicitly within the march of the overall black community's tradition of storytelling and using reproducible imagery to demand recognition of black humanity as part of multi-faceted strategies battling for improved race relations and equality. This chapter treats the LMPC as a modernist venture and undertakes some comparisons to other image-based storytelling from the 20th Century, including the Harlem Renaissance and the non-violent Civil Rights Movement. In this way the dissertation provides an in-depth addendum to Henry Louis Gates' supposition that there has been a considerable history of storytelling about 'New Negro' epochs and the tropes that drive them.[13]

The story of the Johnson men provides us with a chance to expand our understanding of the nation's history of black business and its material and cultural impact. Herb Kelleher, the popular CEO of Southwest Airlines, has been quoted as positing that 'the business of business is people,' a popular culture sound byte that suggests that the many

[13] Henry Louis Gates, 'The Trope of the New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black,' *Representations*, No. 24, Fall 1988, pp. 129-155.

transactions that make up the business world are human relations that abide by the personal, cultural, social, and political experiences of those providing goods and services and those consuming them.[14] Race is also about relationships and American racism, as an adjunct to a history deeply scarred by the practice of a race-based slavery, is especially about controlling who can have relations with whom.[15] The intersection of race and business gives us new opportunities to look at the ways race and identity work in the process of establishing place, humanity, and material well being in America.

[14] Editors of Perseus Publishing, *The Big Book of Business Quotations: More than 5,000 Indispensible Observations on Commerce, Work, Finance, and Management* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Bloomsbury, 2003), p. 150.
[15] Carter A. Wilson, *Racism: From Slavery to Advanced Capitalism* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1996), p. 73.

Chapter 1

Into the West: Mobility, Racial Ambiguity, and the Business End of the Early New Negro Search for America.

Noble Johnson, an African American cow punch hailing from the Pike's Peak region in Colorado, was approached in 1914 by a film-making group, representatives of the Lubin Manufacturing Company, in order to replace an injured actor whose role had required riding a horse. Johnson was known as an expert horseman so, when the director, Romaine Fielding, and his crew asked around for a replacement, they were sent off in search of Johnson who, when found, was glad to ply his skills in front of the camera. Johnson's first role was that of a Native American, the first of many film roles that presented him as a non-white, non-black character. The Lubin Company was based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and had sent their top director to Colorado to produce one of the western-themed films for which he was well known and, a few months after Johnson's initiation into on-screen cowboy work, Fielding asked Johnson to relocate to the east coast so as to join the production team. Noble accepted and, once settled into his new work and city, he wrote home on November 14, 1914, and provided his younger brother, George, some insight regarding his professional interactions with Fielding:

> I am with him most of the time and have an opportunity of a lifetime. He don't know what race prejudice is, and if I can stick and work hard enough, he will push me to the top in this business. I am right with him at his side through all of his directing and have unlimited privileges. Someday I hope to stand high enough in this business to be able to get a position from one company to another and demand good money. There is no limit

to the amount they pay.[16]

The letter continued with a description of Philadelphia, Noble's personal living arrangement, and the observations he made of the circumstances blacks found in the City of Brotherly Love:

> I have a very nice place to stay here and from what I have seen of this 'burg' I like it real well, and will like it even better as soon as I can find a girl who knows the ropes. Prejudice is not strong here. Great many of the best restaurants will serve colored. Everyone seems to be doing well and colored boys are driving some of the best cars on the streets and have other good jobs.[17]

Noble looked forward to watching his toil and willingness to learn in the flowering film industry pay off in professional advancements which would in turn mean upgrades in his earning power that would spell expanded material well-being, including the improvement of the quality of his consumer interfaces. Finding a space such as Philadelphia, where race prejudice seemed muted by comparison to less tolerant areas, a new field of work with undefined ceilings, and an on-the-job superior who was willing to look beyond race and into Noble's skills and personal character was closely connected with his plans to partake of the 'best restaurants' and automobiles. The suggestion is that lives untrammelled by race prejudice could lead to professional and business relationships which would support a purchasing power analogous to that enjoyed by whites and that

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[16] Letter from Noble Johnson to George Johnson, 11/14/1914, George P. Johnson Negro Film Collection (Collection 1042). Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles, University of California at Los Angeles, The Regents of the University of California, 1970. This collection will be primarily referred to as the GPJ Collection.

[17] Ibid.

the progress of the race could be marked, publicly and privately, by the material accumulations and consumptions afforded by that purchasing power. Further, Johnson's letter intimates that the freedom to use one's personal abilities in pursuit of one's ambitions was a preparatory goal that could then lead to the proper founding of a patriarchal family unit.

This very middle class, American view of personal betterment so neatly expressed by Johnson seemed more available to the race as the chances to remove to locations outside the South increased and the efforts of black elites to positively refashion the image and idea of blackness went hand in hand with the search for places where blacks could experience a broader, more universalized version of their humanity. Noble's correspondence and the events which led to his move to Philadelphia bring up a number of themes which were of great importance to African Americans as the Progressive Era came to an end, themes which would over the following decades remain central barometers of the quality of life enjoyed by blacks in this country and themes which will prove to be at the core of this study.

Mobility is the theme that will prove most at play in this chapter – geographic, economic, and racial mobility - and Noble's decision to leave the mountains of Colorado for the urban milieu of the northeast both follows and diverges from the migratory transformations that the race experienced during the involved era. Douglas Henry Daniels has used the term 'travelcraft' to describe the 'outlook and complex of skills that facilitated both long-distance travel and residency' in new locales experienced by African Americans

during the western pioneer years just before and after the Civil War.[18] The story of the Johnson's travels in search of betterment is an ace tale of travelcraft.

Exodus to Belonging: The Great Migration and the Search for the Promised Land

African Americans numbering almost 1.6 million would embark from the South to the North and points West during the years immediately leading up to and following the United States' entry into World War I and the Great Migration, as that massive movement of black bodies has become known, was heavily laden with promises that, in the North, southern blacks could receive the justice and rewards that they felt were denied them in the South.[19] A precipitous decline of European immigration during the war, caused in part by suspicions of the loyalties of Euro-Americans to America and her capitalist project, deprived the North's expanding industrial complex of a primary source of labor just as the war effort required that production undergo a major increase. The fall off in immigration from 1914 to 1915 was a precipitous seventy-three percent representing a difference in real numbers of nearly 900,000 bodies. Those numbers did not rise appreciably until after the war.[20]

The *Chicago Defender*, which was distributed throughout the nation by Pullman Porters and traveling theater groups, penetrated deeply into the South and campaigned in

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[18] Douglas Henry Daniels, 'Travelcraft and Black Pioneer Urbanites, 1850s-1870s,' Sucheng Chan, Daniels, Mario T. Garcia, Terry P. Wilson, (eds.), *Peoples of Color in the American West* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1994), pp. 117-118.
[19] James Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago Illinois, University of Chicago Press, 1989),p. 19.
[20] Scott, *Negro Migration During the War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1920), p.52. In 1914 total immigration was 1,218,480. In 1915 that number had dropped to 326,700. During the years leading to America's actual entry in the war (1917) those numbers remained low (298,826 in 1916 and 295,403 in 1917).

support of the Great Migration by refuting the logic behind claims that African-Americans should remain in the South while at the same time trumpeting the North as a proper destination for blacks fleeing Dixie. One article best summed up the *Defender's* bottom line by way of a sub header that read 'South Not Our Friends.'[21] The article continued somewhat tautologically by positing that 'Your friend is a person who is friendly in every way, a person who will try to assist you when you are down.' The South did not 'spell friendship.' The use of the notion of friendship is telling. For the author, if not for the audience, the issue was not simply equality or monetary gain. Rather the term 'friend' indicates a desire to be connected with or wanted by the other on an almost personal level. One article admonished black workers arriving from the South to 'take heed and make good at your work' as in 'two to five years from now foreigners will be coming back in droves.' 'Make yourself proficient in that line,' suggested the author, for blacks had to positively answer the question 'will the members of the race be able to stand the competition.'[22] That piece ended with an instruction that African-Americans 'work with the sole idea' being "to make yourself wanted."' Both the economic concerns of upward mobility and a desire for inclusion drove this seemingly mercenary tack. The Editorial Pages of the August 12, 1916 edition of the *Defender* noted the following:

> The fact that the white man is not seeking our services
> because of his interest in us matters little at this particular

[21] 'The World's Great War a Mighty Blessing,' *Chicago Defender*, August 5, 1916, p. 10. The article notes 'We need no friend; we need an opportunity to earn our bread and to protect our homes as other men at the North and West.' While this might at first seem to at least partially repudiate the notion of blacks desiring 'friendship,' the mention of the term in the heading must be seen as pointing to some notion of a set of 'friendly' relations between the races, and all that such implies.

[22] Ibid.

> juncture. Our trouble is that we have never had anything worth while to offer the other fellow in exchange for his gold. When we do it will be found that the question of whether we are black or white will be of little consequence.[23]

That quote suggests that, even where 'friendship' was not necessarily the most pressing concern, developing relationships with whites and mainstream power was a paramount goal whose aim was to supplant race-based values with those which were more attuned to the skills and production of the darker race.

The above article also brings to light the fact that the replacement of immigrants by blacks was an essential part of the backstory supporting black decampments for the North. African-Americans, who were 'never before given a chance in the North,' now had an opening that had to be effectively used for advantage.[24] One *Defender* spread urged unspecified persons within the black business community to take over the boot blacking services formerly dominated by Greeks and Italians so that 'industrious boys' of the race might establish a hold.[25] Another *Defender* piece noted that, if it was reasonable for 'the Chinaman, the Japanese, the Italian, the Pole, the Scandinavian, and other foreigners' to grasp America's promise by way of immigration, why not so for blacks? In that same article the writer described whites as 'the enlightened people of the globe' and thereby suggested that the travel involved with immigration would broaden African-American minds by introducing 'new ideas of life...of civilization, of the larger world.'[26] While those statements carry a strong undercurrent of deference to whiteness, The *Defender* was not

[23] Editorial staff, 'The Eternal Question,' *Chicago Defender*, August 12, 1916, p.12.
[24] W.S. Latham, 'Migration,' *Chicago Defender*, August 26, 1916, p.12.
[25] Staff, *Chicago Defender*, August 12, 1916, p.11.
[26] W.S. Latham, 'Migration,' *Chicago Defender*, August 26, 1916, p.12.

chary about elevating blacks over other races or ethnicities. For example, one bit of ballyhoo entitled 'Mexicans not Satisfactory' reported that Mexican field hands who had not proven efficient were replaced by blacks whose work was 'far more satisfactory.'[27] By replacing immigrants and other marginalized populations blacks hoped to insinuate themselves into the social positions which the departed ethnics had vacated. In other words, it was hoped that the opportunities presented by labor needs in the North would allow African-Americans to approximate the paths taken to 'whiteness' by ethnic Europeans while also accentuating black American-ness. The migration stood as a step toward full citizenship to be made by African-Americans 'determined not to live where taxation without representation was in vogue.'[28] The *Defender* portrayed the social and economic elevation of blacks as beneficial to white society and the symbiosis inherent in such a claim demonstrates that the tastemakers and pundits on the *Defender's* staff perceived a need to establish that whites and blacks could build a best of all possible societies if they worked together and recognized the needs each had of the other.[29] Black mobility and the Great Migration was a profoundly important step toward a new America.

The search African-Americans made was undertaken in order to locate opportunities for material improvement, social and cultural belonging and acceptance, and partnership in the American experience. That optimism held that there were spaces and opportunities for interactions with whites and mainstream power that blacks could access and upon which they could hope to build lives of meaningful sustenance and comfort. Such

[27] Staff, *Chicago Defender*, August 26, 1916, p.1.
[28] Staff, 'Ministers Try to Help Keep Laborers South,' *Chicago Defender*, August 19, 1916, p. 2.
[29] Staff, *Chicago Defender*, August 26, 1916, p.12.

assimilationist views in the black community were often coupled with middle class mores that held that material well being could be achieved through hard work and personal excellence, especially where breakthroughs could be based on one-on-one, individual relations such as the bond Noble hoped to nurture with Fielding. The ability to establish relations with powerful, amenably-minded whites was a primary strategy for uplift among many educated, upwardly bound blacks, though such improvements were pursued alongside ongoing efforts to exploit expansions of black mobility in order to establish a nationwide network of black cultural, social, and economic realms. The restless movements of Noble Johnson and his family, brothers Virgel and George, and father, Perry, provide us with a unique opportunity to observe the specifics of a black family and its ideas and practices of race and business as they connected to and interacted with a more general set of cultural and economic experiences had by the black community. Observing the values, strategies, accomplishments, and shortcomings of the Johnson men as they lived out their migratory times not only allows us to begin to contemplate the ways their personal lives influenced their subsequent activities, especially their business endeavors, but also to lay the groundwork for understanding the ways that business, race, and identity intersect.

The American Dream Rises in the West: The Johnsons in Colorado Spring

The Great Migration took place on an axis that ran North and South. Shortly after the collapse of Reconstruction a small but notable number of African Americans decided to leave the South so as to set up 'black towns' in areas west of the Mississippi, locations dedicated to creating spaces owned and controlled by blacks,. Sometimes referred to as

'Exodusters,' most of these émigrés headed to locales in Kansas.[30] Like the Exodusters, the Johnson family sought their fortunes on an axis that was primarily given to East and West movements, though their goal was not first and foremost to create or participate in a black sanctuary. Noble Johnson's father, Perry Johnson, and his wife, Georgia, nee Reed, both mulattoes, and their first born son, Virgel, moved from Marshall, Missouri in the late 1870s to Colorado Springs, Colorado in search of white men of means who required Perry's skills as a trainer and racer of horses.[31] Noble was born in 1881, a daughter in 1883, and then the youngest son, George, in 1885.

Colorado Springs was founded in 1871 by General William J. Palmer after he became enamored of the beauty of the Pike's Peak region and he came to believe that the nearby mineral springs would prove a lucrative draw for wealthy patrons. The fruition of that vision drew Perry Johnson's interest. The history of African Americans in Colorado Springs began at its foundation with the arrival of George Motley, Palmer's cook and orderly, a

[30] Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1977).

[31] George P. Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' Oral History Program of University of California at Los Angeles (Los Angeles, California: The Regents of the University of California, 1970) p. 39. Much of the information regarding the Johnson family comes from this oral history which was provided by George Johnson over the course of 13.5 hours of recorded recollections taped during the period spanning July 11, 1967, through February 28, 1968. The interviewers were Elizabeth Dixon and Adelaide Tusler, representatives of the UCLA Oral History Program. The Dixon interviews, which comprise the transcript from pages 1 – 108, involved discussions with George Johnson which were augmented with the subject's extensive notes and written materials. Johnson was also asked to prepare some statements about some of topics and people he covered. The Tusler interviews, which comprise pages 109 – 303, involved more in depth treatments of previously covered events and issues. Though no notes were used during these discussions, George prepared outlines in advance of each session. Tusler edited the final product which constitutes a verbatim record of Johnsons's responses save some minor editing an grammatical corrections; The not of Perry and Georgia's mulatto status stems from their entry into the 1880 U.S. Federal Census.

runaway slave the General had taken under wing while serving the Union army during the Civil War. Motley would remain in Colorado Springs until his death in November of 1916.[32] A small but vibrant African American community, usually fluctuating between 3-4% of the overall population at any given time between the founding and 1900, would steadily grow with the city which, though afflicted by various expressions of racial prejudice, offered certain freedoms and opportunities to newly arriving blacks. While privately held spaces open to the public such as restaurants and hotels were often closed to blacks or segregated, as in the case of theaters, other general spaces such as public parks and public transportation were in no way subject to stratification based on race. There was also steady work in the resort service industry that came from the hotels and restaurants. By the time Perry Johnson brought his family to the foot of the Peak there were 160 or so blacks residing in Colorado Springs who supported the Payne Chapel AME Church, a masonic lodge, and some small black business ventures which were followed by the establishment of a black women's club and, toward the end of the century, the primarily Republican Afro-American Club of Colorado Springs. Blacks in Colorado Springs would join the police department and win public office before 1900 and, thereafter, would establish a branch of the National Negro Business League.[33]

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[32] John Stokes Holley, *The Invisible People of the Pikes Peak Region* (Colorado Springs, Colorado, Friends of the Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum, 1990), p. 3

[33] Ibid., 3-40.

The Pursuit of Mastery: A Family of Horsemen and the Business of Extraction

Colorado Springs, as a locus melding rough-hewn frontier mindsets with those of a playground for the extremely well heeled, brought together ideas of masculinity, commerce, and class which often found expression through the control over and presentation of horses. Consequently, horsemen of varying sorts were a visible part of the city's profile in the first decades of its existence and African Americans such as Perry Johnson were central participants in those equestrian endeavors. Man's mastery over nature, pushing back the borders between the chaos of the wilderness and the open, lighted order of civilization, often included the picture of men astride horses taming other beasts or plowing up the earth's nurture. Frontiersmen and cowboys therefore literally harness the power of the horse, its majesty and utility, and give it direction. Harvey Groves, a black cowboy of Manitou Springs, adjacent to Colorado Springs, was known as an expert horseman and an archetypal figure of western masculinity presented as entertainment in Wild West demonstrations from the early 1900s.[34] Beyond being a beast of burden, a tool in the belt, so to speak, the horse also has a long history of symbolism for aristocracy and other elites. For members of the uppermost echelons of society the horse, and their mastery over the beast, reflects their own intelligence, bravery, martial skill, and material superiority as the ownership and care of fine horses was an expense that few could manage and exploit in such a refined fashion. The breeding of horses invites the expression of aristocracy's claims on hierarchical dominance as a matter of divine will

[34] Ibid., 18, 19

played out over generations of pedigree which provide a record of the lasting truth and rectitude of the involved imbalance of power and right.[35]

Within the context of slavery the property rights found in the human body attached the performance and physical excellence of that body to the owner and there created dynamics wherein the deeds of those bodies were to some notable degree claimed by the owner as a reflection of his or her own power. The slave was not unlike the steed in this way. However, the excellence residing in the person of the slave was never altogether available to the master and instead had to be acknowledged and, as talent and ability often must be, given the resources and spaces necessary for development. Where the development of those talents was seen as being in the interest of the slave owner the slave's human potentials could be given freer reign and overt respect. Slaves who demonstrated exceptional abilities as jockeys and horse trainers were often recognized for those talents and they parleyed that set of gifts into an experience of slavery that was much ameliorated, softened by less onerous, more forgiving work regimens, the opportunity to travel, favorable relations with the master, and the attainment of the upper echelons of their segregated community.[36] In the context of a community like late 19th-century Colorado Springs, however, the aspect of the elite's control of the trainer and jockey was much more tenuous and, as a result, the force and effect of the talent and ability of the horseman came to the fore in order to establish a relationship of employer

[35] Anne Marie Carstens, 'To Bury a Ruler: The Meaning of the Horse in Aristocratic Burials,' http://www.academia.edu/375637/To_bury_a_ruler_the_meaning_of_the_horse_in_aristocratic_burials

[36] William Green, 'Becoming a Race Rider,' *The Unlevel Playing Field: A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport*, David Kenneth Wiggins and Patrick B. Miller, Eds. (Champaign, Illinois, University of Illinois Press, 2003), pp. 24-26.

and employee which was negotiated based on recognition of the horseman's fairly rarified skill set which led to the horseman's connection with the status flowing from mastery of the beast and the expanse of nature it represented.

Colorado Springs was during the years before and after the turn of the 20th century a location wherein blackness was not a disqualifier for participation in the exchange of funds and services connected with the horse and masculine expressions of mastery. Charles Collins, the headwaiter at a luxury hotel in the Springs, scaled back his exertions in that position in order to build and then exclusively pursue the entrepreneurial endeavor of a riding school.[37] Collins learned his craft in New Orleans prior to arriving in Colorado and took the mantle of 'Riding Master of Colorado Springs,' his advertisements including pictures of himself in top hat, riding boots and pants, jacket and collared shirt with tie, while perched on a horse as it cleared a hurdle. [38]

Where Collins put himself out as a conduit to genteel riding, Perry Johnson trained horses to race, to compete in contests of speed and agility like polo matches, all as extensions of the upper classes' sparring with one another on proving grounds meant to display their superiority, gamesmanship, and ability to manage risk. Perry's personal abilities served his employers within the framework of a socio-economic system that did not present him with equal opportunities to rise in general society as a result of his displays of mastery, but those displays brought perquisites nonetheless and clearly the victories won on behalf of his clients were also his own and served to inform his perception of self and the place that self had in broader society. The provision of such

[37] Holley, *The Invisible People of the Pikes Peak Region*, p. 16, 17, & Chapter 4.
[38] *Colorado Springs Gazette*, January 1, 1899.

services afforded Perry with opportunities for travel and material well being that were not widely available to other African Americans while also attaching to his person, to his sense of self, some of the prestige of a mastery over nature that is a hallmark of western civilization. His business was built around traveling to locales where his skills would be needed by the wealthy, which is to say that, while he serviced a class, he also serviced this class in multiple contexts and thereby lived according to the profits of a skill set that claimed participation in commercial relations which were based on values and cultural practices that transcended any provincial sense of self. Perry clearly thought of himself as a horseman who had a skill set and professional profile that translated over the expanse of the nation and his inclusion of his children in the business undoubtedly helped to instill in them the expectation that their quests for success could be undertaken on pathways that fanned out over state borders and beyond any prescription against mobility. His experiences in Colorado were but a first step in establishing movement as a key ingredient to material gain and professional status.

Perry was the 'caretaker' of the Colorado Springs Racetrack and supervised and managed that facility during the racing season. For a time he was also in the blacksmith business a man named William W. Galbraith.[39] His expertise in the service of white wealth enabled him to reside in Ivywild, an area otherwise bereft of non-servant African Americans. The horseman's wealthy clients gave he and his family a house of brick to live in and they resided there along with an African American woman who, though treated as

[39] Holly, *The Invisible People of the Pikes Peak Region*, p. 18.

family, had come with them from Missouri to work in the home as a servant.[40] The grounds included large stables for the care and keep of his horses and those of the area's millionaires who raced trotters and indulged in polo ponies at The Broadmoor, an opulent resort for the rich.

Perry raced and trained trotters, pacers, and harness racers on a half-mile track also located on the property and he could often be seen running the horses in a one-horse sulky.[41] The oldest brothers sometimes caught feral ponies and, utilizing repurposed croquet mallets, trained them for use in polo. Perry often took four or five horses, sometimes including his own, east by train to Grand Racing Tracks in places like Peoria, Illinois and Glens Falls, New York. He would rent a baggage car, construct stalls for the horses, and set out. If he had two horses worth racing in one event he would take one of the older boys on the road as a second racer and in that way the young men began to gain a sense of the possibilities that mobility offered, along with the different circumstances that could be found around the country. Perry earned a percentage of any winnings, was paid for the care and handling of the horses, and also received reimbursement for expenses, including fees, lodging, and meals. George, the youngest son, was for the two years he lived with the rest of the family responsible for handling the bookkeeping upon Perry's return.[42] The complexities of racing included trying to establish such detailed control over the horse that a victory would be by the least margin possible as the animals

[40] Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 33.
[41] Holly, *The Invisible People of the Pikes Peak Region*, p. 18.
[42] Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 34.

were grouped according to prior times and the better the time the greater the subsequent competition.

When their father was on the road for racing purposes Virgel and Noble would be left in charge of the several white hired hands that worked for Perry. Negro hands were not used, as there were few with any knowledge of horses. The Johnson operation was not one that was forced to abide by the grossest strictures of the era's race relations and the optimal management of the business was not subjected to compromises required by necessities of white domination or racially segregated workplaces. Just as the boys learned to traverse the boundaries of the nation's physical terrain they also learned to believe they could traverse racial borders as needed. Business, the expertise of handling horses for performance and competition, was managed according to judgments and values that were not subjugated to the logics of racism.

Another noteworthy aspect of Colorado Springs' masculine culture of dominion over the earth was the hunger for extracting wealth from the earth beneath their feet, primarily in the way of gold. The gold fever that had swept over northern portions of the state did not take hold in the Colorado Springs area until 1890, after Perry Johnson had already established himself in the area, and he and his sons actively participated in those eager gambits by loading up a pack mule with a mining kit and heading into the Rocky Mountains where prospecting was undertaken in Victor, Independence, and Cripple Creek.[43] A tent house would be erected, including a wooden floor, bunks, and a stove, a claim would be staked out, enough ore would be dug for an assay at a nearby reduction

[43] 'Colorado Mines,' http://www.miningartifacts.org/Colorado-Mines.html

plant and, if it seemed the spot would pay, the dig would continue, if the assay said otherwise, the location would be abandoned and another chosen. Though no major strike ever occurred for the Johnsons and Perry lost a large portion of the profits he made racing as a result of chasing a big strike, these endeavors reinforced the picture of independent masculinity as one that lorded over and removed from the earth the raw materials of wealth. [44]

The Johnson Boys: Noble and George

The guidance and example that Perry provided his three sons reverberated through their lives. The care and security of a paternal source of authority which passes on expertise to the son brings to mind the portion of Noble's above-quoted letter which describes him as looking over the shoulder of Romaine Fielding, awaiting the dispensation of refined information from a source of trusted authority steeped in filial relations. A few details regarding Noble Johnson 's background are here in order. He ceased going to school at age 15 in favor of two years spent travelling the racing circuit with Perry and he gained an unusually detailed knowledge of training and looking after horses during that time. A jack-of-all-trades even in his youth, Noble held a variety of labor-intensive positions in Colorado in the years leading up to 1914. He spelled his down time as a cowboy working a variety of odd jobs which took him westward to San Francisco, destinations in the Pacific Northwest such as Portland and Seattle, through to Canada, and then back to Colorado. Between those travels and the two years spent with his father on

[44] Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' P. 35.

the horseracing scene of the Midwest and Eastern Seaboard, Noble gained extensive firsthand knowledge of the breadth of America and its interconnectivity. [45]

George Johnson, the youngest of Perry Johnson's children, was born in Colorado Springs on October 29, 1885. His mother passed away shortly thereafter and, as his father was already raising three young children aged two, four, and six years, it was decided that George would be sent to live with Nancy Turner, a black woman, widowed and illiterate, who worked as a servant and had a room in the wealthy white household of Edward De La Vergne. De La Vergne, a leader in the incorporation of the Ivywild area in which they resided, was the scion of a family which owned a department store in Colorado Springs along with a sugar plantation in Hawaii.[46] George would later describe Turner and De La Vergne as the most important people in his life.[47] The De La Vergne's three-story home shared the property with multiple barns housing various farm animals, including some peacocks for an added touch of the exotic, and a covered springhouse that fed several streams and ponds down a tiered system that emptied into a large receiving pond.

George's socialization involved extensive interaction with well-off whites and only a very few blacks as he resided in one of Colorado Springs' tonier neighborhoods and had a battery of friends, both girls and boys, who were all white. The school he walked to had only a couple of black students other than himself who were sprinkled throughout the

[45] 'Noble Johnson,' Microfilm, GPJ Collection; Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History.'
[46] 'Will Incorporate Town of Ivywild,' *Colorado Springs Weekly Gazette*, November 20, 1902, p. 5. --- Turner's illiteracy is found at 22.
[47] Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 36. George made this comment while noting that, by chance, both Nancy Turner and Edward De La Vergne had been interred in the same Los Angeles cemetery, an indication of just how deeply the urge to push westward was embedded in those who most influenced George Johnson.

elementary grades and he attended services at a white church. George and Turner generally ate in the servant's quarters, but, on Sundays and holidays, supper was taken with the De La Vergnes. The remainder of the Johnson clan did not go to the De La Vergne's home to see George and, though his father's training facility and home were visible from where he was staying, Turner only occasionally took him to visit with his family. Information of the lives of other blacks only reached George in wisps as he was not spoken to about blacks nor shown any papers or magazines produced by or for blacks.[48]

Whenever the De La Vergnes would travel to Hawaii to visit their sugar holdings Turner took work with other white families and George followed in tow. While residing in the home of Thomas Kirkwood, an elder in the Presbyterian Church responsible for a parish that ranged congregations in three states, George developed a friendship with the youngest boy of that family, Marion, who was two years his junior.[49] George performed various chores alongside of Marion and together they attended neighborhood parties, which, he recounted many years later, included 'kissing games and so forth,' and shared cakes upon which Turner would inscribe in icing 'for Marion and George.'[50] The issue of George's race was not brought up during his participation in these events and his mention of this fact in conjunction with his recollections of socialization intimate that he was inculcated by those experiences in a way that gave him reasons to feel associated with the world of Colorado Springs' well-to-do white youths and few to assume that his race was call for acute perceptions of difference between himself and his peers.

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[48] Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 2.
[49] "Memorial Resolution: Marion Rice Kirkwood (1887–1978)," http://histsoc.stanford.edu/pdfmem/KirkwoodM.pdf
[50] Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 3.

However, there were disparities in the way they were treated, including the expectations that were held for each of them. Marion was called in from play so that he could complete lessons under the oversight of his father while George was allowed to remain outside until darkness came. The De La Vergnes made no effort to instill in him a work ethic or the value of money as servants and a white handyman did all work in that household.[51] George presented his preparation for manhood and independence as having been retarded by this lack of guidance. Even after returning to live with his father and siblings at age 12, his family showed little interest in the process of his becoming a man. George continued to school with Marion and in high school, while lunching together and giving witness to their ambitions for life, they each expressed to the other their intentions of studying law at Colorado College. Marion Kirkwood would instead attend undergraduate studies at Stanford University before going to law school at Stanford and taking additional legal studies at Harvard University.[52] Marion had a distinguished career in law, including thirty years as the Dean of Stanford University's School of Law. George's plans were re-routed by a meeting with Edward De La Vergne who had called the young man to join him on a visit to the library. The two sat over several books chosen by De La Vergne, including one about Booker T. Washington and another about the Hampton Institute, the Negro college from which Washington had graduated, and De La Vergne announced that George would be sent to Virginia in order to complete his studies at Hampton.[53]

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[51] Ibid.
[52] "Memorial Resolution: Marion Rice Kirkwood (1887-1978).
[53] Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' pp. 4-6.

George graduated from Hampton in four years but his comments about that experience indicate that he did not develop a connection to that institution or with any aspects of southern lifeways. He had never been in the South before his Hampton years and found being 'treated as a Negro' to be 'very much of a shock.'[54] George explained of his discussions with Marion Kirkwood regarding plans for college that he had been 'ignorant' and 'knew nothing of conditions,' meaning he had not been aware that over the nation at large his social status was first that of a black person and that 'conditions' were such that his color bracketed his choices and opportunities.[55] He lamented having been packed off to a world of segregation wherein his race was a primary determinant connected with strictures of marginalization, and he felt that the difficulty he would have adjusting to that world was not taken into consideration by the decision makers who arranged for his continued schooling.

> They forgot to realize that Hampton, Virginia is the Deep South. The teachers were white but all the students were colored students, and mostly dark southern. Hampton was formed the same as Tuskegee, with the idea of training southern Negroes in the three R's with the intention of them going back to the South and teaching other Negroes. They did not cater to higher education – the Negroes that wanted higher education were told to go to Wilberforce College in Ohio and Howard Institute in Washington, D.C.[56]

For George being sent to the South for his schooling meant being forced to operate in an area or context wherein being black had fixed meanings that bounded his opportunities to make for himself choices which reflected his personal tastes, values and expectations.

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[54] Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 5
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.

The culture of southern blackness was set apart from his prior experiences as a person of color by a myriad of trappings such as the content of his coursework, the opportunity to engage in relations with whites as peers, and other personal instances of consumption, including the food offered at the school, a selection of meals he could not tolerate. The menu of black-eyed peas, corn bread, hominy, and other staples of southern African-American comfort cuisine led George to whenever possible dine at restaurants and, as De La Vergne was providing him with only $10 per month for his expenditures, he worked on campus as a janitor and saved his earnings from summer work in New York and New Jersey in order to pay for the indulgence of his palette. Money helped to recast his circumstances, if only briefly, into occasions that proffered the consumption of foodstuffs that worked as an extension of his sense of self, tastes, and wellbeing.[57] What is more, the process of earning that money apparently led him to travel to locales and contexts that allowed him to work for whites. George's pursuit of earnings that would allow him to purchase items that fulfilled his tastes and material expectations led him directly away from any lifestyle models that fell in line with Booker T. Washington's advice to southern blacks that they remain in the South casting their lot where they found themselves. Rather, his dedication to his sense of self led him to undertake seasonal migrations.

Johnson's mention of the darkness of the skin of his fellow students in conjunction with the southernness of their blackness points to an understanding on his part that the nature or quality of blackness as an experience stemmed in part from the associations one had with others, especially whites, and that blackness was therefore contextual. The

[57] Ibid.

darkness of the pigmentation he noted suggests an almost unalloyed blackness, one that admitted no interaction with whiteness. The cultural and the biological are thrown together here both in terms of separate social spheres and the resultant lack of cultural and procreative mixture. George seems to have seen the combined darkness and southernness of his Hampton classmates as a symbol of truncated options, of being a product of southern racist ideologies that funneled black lives into cramped spaces with few paths of egress.

George indicated that he learned very little in his four years at Hampton. The coursework was aimed at preparing the students to master the basics of literacy and fundamental mathematics so that the students could then provide instruction to 'southern Negroes,' which is to say those rural blacks that came from communities largely bereft of education. Johnson not only found no edification in the curriculum, the very goals of the institution were confining to him and, though forward looking, could not build for him a corporate sense of blackness to which he felt belonging. George had only very minimal contact with the black community of Colorado Springs and had on later occasions referred to members of that community as 'them,' a group about which he knew very little. [58] The southern Negro was even more alien to him. The would-be attorney bridled at learning that his blackness entailed being schooled not for the purpose of readying him for a flourishing livelihood as an individual but instead so that he might unprofitably exert himself in the name of raising the circumstance of the southern expanse of the race. On some level George seems to have experienced being attached to blackness and a corporate

[58] Ibid., p. 254.

position within the race's southern sphere as an attempt to shackle him, as though blackness were a type of capture in its own right.

Having grown up largely outside a constellation of forces that required him to consider his blackness as a marker establishing boundaries for his relationships and aspirations, George struggled to manage being black in the South and set about erecting a view of blackness that could encompass all of his experiences. We should not, however, make the mistake of thinking that his desire to push back against the limitations he encountered at Hampton were rooted solely in being black in the South. We must instead recall the moment where De La Vergne informed George of his college destination and that moment's meaning relative to the other developmental situations he specifically set out as explanatory of his person.

Johnson's retelling of his youth made it clear that his sense of a social distance between himself and whites was not great and he found it natural to compare the efforts of the Kirkwood patriarch to provide guidance to his son with the lack of guidance he received. One could easily read this as a reference to his own father's absence, to the fact that the passage of expertise with horses and basic business knowledge imparted to his brothers had been denied to him. But the recounting of the Kirkwood father-son dynamic in connection with the authoritative decision handed down by Edward De La Vergne regarding his enrollment at Hampton indicates that George had some sense of belonging in the world of whites and that he further had some expectations of having his future wellbeing taken into account by the well-placed whites with whom he was raised. Even after moving back to live with his father it was De La Vergne who appears to have

arranged and afforded his time at Hampton. From this we can discern that George had reason to feel at home in the world of the whites of late 19th century Colorado Springs and it was in that milieu that his ideations of self and future were formed.

George had believed that he would be able to pursue his professional intentions and the material and social profits that would follow, as he saw fit and as his abilities would allow. And then, in the very moment that his sense of being a person in whom Edward De La Vergne had carried a notable interest bore sponsorship he also learned that he was to be cared for in a certain way, in a manner that admitted a new qualification that ran more broadly than his lack of actual filiation with the De La Vergne family. He was to be cared for as a person of blackness and that meant, at least in the mind of Edward De La Vergne, that the potential that was seen in George was to be fulfilled at Hampton, in the mold of Booker T. Washington, the champion of a particular method of responding to the dynamics that worked to place blackness in the nation's overall social and economic hierarchies. In short, after providing comforts that were partially responsible for inculcating George Johnson in a manner that did not inform the young man of the broader meanings of being black in America, Edward De Le Vergne became the first to treat George in a pronounced race-based manner and in that moment the DuBoisian veil was dropped into the young man's world.

George was not simply sent to college, he was brought face to face with his blackness as it related to the nation's wider race issues and then introduced to a racialized culture that presented a particular range of experiences of blackness. In this fashion George became aware of both the possibility of feeling part of and held at a distance from lives

lived in both whiteness and blackness. Even decades later when looking over his notes and verbally recollecting his days at Hampton, Johnson described the decision to send him to college in the 'Deep South' as a product of forgetfulness regarding geography, a nod more properly recognized as pointing to what might have been a forgetfulness on De La Vergne's part regarding George's individuality, his basic humanity, and the fact that a person with his background regarding blackness might not be expected to be gainfully thrust into the 'Deep South' and its plantation logics. In this light George's summer mobilizations to New York and New Jersey to earn restaurant money for his forays back to the South were searches for opportunities to fulfill his own humanity and provide insight into the ways he began to understand the maintenance of his own identity in America.

George in Oklahoma and Nebraska: Patronage and Realms of Ambiguity

George graduated in 1904 and, though he intended to make his way by train to California where he planned to remove Nancy Turner from service with the De La Vergnes, who had a home in Los Angeles, he was sidetracked by a meeting with his sister in Topeka, Kansas. George learned that his father was coming through on his way to Oklahoma with a number of horses. George was enlisted to go to Oklahoma to assist with the horses.[59] The Johnson papers do not detail why Perry Johnson departed from Colorado Springs, but it is likely that his hunger for improved earning possibilities were tempted by tales of rapid developments in the territories and the whiff of big things to come connected with oil. Douglas Henry Daniels noted that a goodly portion of the travelcraft he found in the West was connected with the search for the riches of extractive endeavor, a point also noted in

[59] Notes, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

other studies of mobile black entrepreneurs such as Juliet E. K. Walker's *Free Frank*.[60] George and Perry arrived after some early exploratory successes had occurred in the territories, such as the Red Fork strike of 1901, and before the Tulsa area exploded with the Glenn Pool discovery.[61]

By the time George and his father made their way into the Oklahoma and Indian territories both areas were legendary for their provisions of new beginnings for western-directed pioneer spirits seeking land and the opportunity to grow in a boom atmosphere.

> In some respects the recent settlement of Oklahoma was the most remarkable thing of the present century. Unlike Rome, the city of Guthrie was built in a day. To be strictly accurate in the matter, it might be said that it was built in an afternoon. At twelve o'clock on Monday, April 22d, the resident population of Guthrie was nothing; before sundown it was at least ten thousand. In that time streets had been laid out, town lots staked off, and steps taken toward the formation of a municipal government. At twilight the camp-fires of ten thousand people gleamed on the grassy slopes of the Cimarron Valley, where, the night before, the coyote, the gray wolf, and the deer had roamed undisturbed. Never before in the history of the West has so large a number of people been concentrated in one place in so short a time. To the conservative Eastern man, who is wont to see cities grow by decades, the settlement of Guthrie was magical beyond belief; to the quick-acting resident of the West, it was merely a particularly lively town-site speculation.62

The above quote communicates the combination of excitement created by the opening of huge swaths of available real estate and the visions of a modernizing event pointing

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[60] Douglas Henry Daniels, 'Travelcraft and Black Pioneer Urbanites, 1850s-1870s' pp. 117-118; Juliet E. K. Walker, *Free Frank: A Black Pioneer on the Antebellum Frontier* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1983).
[61] Red Fork Field, *Oklahoma Historical Society Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History & Cultrue*, http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/R/RE004.html.
[62] William Willard Howard, 'The Rush to Oklahoma,' *Harper's Weekly*, May 18, 1889, 391-394.

toward a transformative future for the land and the settlers. The great cities of Europe and the American East were at once the standard and surpassed by the alacrity with which a new town in the Oklahoma Territory was plotted, staked, and settled.

They initially attempted to settle in Claremore, Indian Territory. Claremore was not sufficiently populated by wealthy families requiring the services of a highly skilled horseman, so they moved on to Tulsa, which was in the process of a phenomenal expansion driven by the Glenn Pool oil fields. However, it is worth noting that Johnson's narration of those early days of exploring the Indian Territories for points of entry into a growing economy included several mentions that Claremore was the birthplace of Will Rogers, whose parents were partially of Cherokee blood quantum. Roger's father, Clement Vann Rogers, had applied in 1900 for the inclusion of he and his son, then just weeks shy of the majority age of 21, on the Cherokee rolls and asserted that he was of Cherokee blood and had resided in the territory throughout his 61 years.[63] Johnson does not specifically explain the meaning of his repeated notice of Rogers' connection to Claremore and it is therefore possible that such was simply a nod to Rogers' subsequent fame. However, given George Johnson's overall attendance to the details of instances wherein the bounds of whiteness were crossed by people of color, and given his ideations of the opportunities afforded by the inclusivity arising out of the shifting boundaries of Native American identity and the connection that such identification had on property rights, it seems very likely that his interest in Rogers also included knowledge of Rogers' ethnic background.

[63] Department of Interior document, Application for Inclusion on Cherokee Nation Rolls, http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/fed-indian-policy/images/application-page-03.gif;

Rogers' rise as an extremely successful, multi-media figure was emblematic of both a fruitful blending of non-whiteness into mainstream American society via the accessing of whiteness and the establishment of a base of financial options, property ownership, and participation for the creation of a sub-nation by claims of non-whiteness.[64]

The territories constituted an area that brought together a confluence of several assimilationist traditions that stewed turn-of-the-century perceptions of ethnicity, race, nation, and economic opportunity in ways both promising and discouraging. Native Americans had a history of taking into their tribes' non-members, even non-Indians, as a method of addressing disputes and maintaining their populations.[65] The Indian Removal Act of 1830 marked the onset of nearly a decade of the United States pushing southeastern Native Americans into areas west of the Mississippi River. The Indian Territories were home for members of the Five Civilized Tribes, a moniker given to the Cherokees, Choctaws, Seminoles, Creeks (Muscogees), and Chickasaws that was meant to highlight their varying but incomplete degrees of acceptance and participation in European-based values and lifeways, including the ownership of slaves. The relocation of slave-owning tribal members was eased by accommodations that protected the removal of the slaves, so in many instances the slaves of the Five Tribes migrated, as well. Black assimilation into the Cherokee and Creek tribes was abetted by amalgamation that resulted in a population

[64] Ben Yagoda, *Will Rogers: A Biography* (New York, N.Y., Knopf, 1993) 3,4.
[65] For in depth coverage of the Native American practice of absorbing non-members as 'cover' for grievances and other losses see Richard White's *The Middle Ground: Indians' Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and Gregory Evans Dowd's *War Under Heaven: Pontiac, the Indian Nations, & the British Empire,* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

that included many individuals who had bloodlines that crisscrossed the ethnic and racial lines of blackness, whiteness, and Native American status. Slaves, escaped slaves, and some free blacks connected with the tribes made the trek from the South to the new territories and there established an initial foothold for peoples of African descent. [66]

After the Civil War slaves were freed and many became freedmen members of the tribes wherein they had been held as slaves. As a result, when The Dawes Severalty Act of 1887 and its subsequent operations coerced Native Americans to abandon communal ownership of the lands in the territories in favor of land allotments based on homesteading guidelines that set out 160 acres of land per member, the tribes, including members who had African backgrounds, became landowners in ways meant to assimilate them into the methods of individual property ownership and development.

These allotments made pronouncements of Indian-ness potential moves toward considerable property holdings and therefore material advancement within the mainstream American economic system. Some individuals who claimed whiteness or blackness thereby had impetus to claim Indian-ness, as well, authentically or not. In this way, there were in Indian Territory spaces wherein histories of racial intermixture, and the resulting racial ambiguity, pressed forward into circumstances that created cause for a number of people of African descent to attempt to marry their blackness with their American-ness via their filiative and associative connections with Native American status.

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[66] Mark Stewart, *The Indian Removal Act: Forced Relocation* (Minneapolis, Minnesota, Compass Point Books, 2007); Daniel Littlefield, James Parins, eds., *Encyclopedia of American Indian Removal* (Santa Barbara, California, 2011); For a treatment of the history of blacks within the Creek and Cherokee Nations see Katja May, *African Americans and Native Americans in the Creek and Cherokee Nations, 1830s to 1920s: Collision and Collusion* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), pp. 223-255.

The territories were, therefore, both a location of new economic horizons and a spaces wherein the workings of race were not quite as ossified as they were in more settled areas of the nation, especially those in the South. Many African Americans from outside the territories moved in from places like Kansas and Missouri in search of improved opportunities and muted strains of racial conflict and limitation.[67]

George and Perry settled in Tulsa in 1906. The oil boom in that area was just months old as the Glenn Pool had been struck on November 22, 1905. That oil field, which would prove to be one of the most productive sources of sweet crude the country would ever know, started on the bed of a creek and was named for the property owner, Ida Glenn, a Creek Indian who had leased the land to two veterans of the territory's prior oil strikes.[68] After the oil began to flow Tulsa grew exponentially in size and wealth. George would later note that it was his understanding that Muskogee could have been a center for a good deal of the oil industry and infrastructure that cropped up in the wake of the Glenn Pool but the wealthy whites had wanted to steer clear of Muskogee's high rate of black property owners while also making certain that as few people of color as possible collected the oil that might have been beneath those black-owned lands.[69] A 1912 headline in the Tulsa Democrat, the city's primary paper, had noted the growth of Tulsa's black population and sounded off alarms of an ebbing whiteness by asking if Tulsa was to be 'Muskogeed.'[70] Though George had moved away from Tulsa by the time that headline was published, his

[67] Ibid.
[68] M.S. Vassilou, *Historical Dictionary of the Petroleum Industry* (Plymouth, England, Scarecrow Press, 2009), p. 219.
[69] Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 69.
[70] James M. Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance: The Tulsa Race War and its Legacy* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002), p.38.

perceptions of Tulsa's guard against black progress was no doubt nurtured by Tulsa's increasingly aggressive segregation. Virtually all of the city's blacks lived north of the main railroad tracks and they were not included on the rolls of any of the oil industry's work force. Nonetheless, Tulsa drew blacks from far and wide as there was a good deal of work for African Americans and Tulsa became home to one of the most successful black enclaves in the Southwest.[71]

The black part of Tulsa centered around higher than average servant's wages and the business opportunities created by forcing all of the city's blacks into a single area. The business section of town was located on Greenwood Avenue, the only major street in the black section that did not also run into the white portions of Tulsa, and the pride African American Tulsans had for that stretch of road that was theirs and theirs alone led them to refer to the entirety of the enclave as the Greenwood Area. Black businesses and professionals such as doctors and lawyers thrived in Greenwood and carried on enough commerce that Tulsa was known to have been the location of the nation's 'Black Wall Street.'[72] George jumped right into the fray and, in addition to providing typewriting services for legal documents and the like, shortly thereafter partnered with a real estate man named William L. Mckee to start up a Negro newspaper, *The Tulsa Guide*. Advertised as being 'conducted fearlessly, and solely in the interest of the Negro race,' *The Guide* was a weekly which joined other African American periodicals in the area like *The Muskogee*

[71] Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Louisiana State University Press, 1982).
[72] Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance: The Tulsa Race War and its Legacy*, p.43.

Cimeter.[73] Though Mckee was presented as the publisher and head of the paper, George, the Business Manager, later reported that he was the force behind the *Guide's* operations and did all of the news gathering, preparations, and business end details like distribution. Johnson got his printing done through *The Tulsa Democrat*, the area's primary white newspaper, and he worked out a deal whereby *The Guide* was able to use some of the news from *The Democrat* that he deemed of suitable interest to his readership. George gathered the news from the black community himself, focusing primarily on the goings on in town or the territory. Advertising was taken from black and white sources. The paper was nationally distributed, sometimes with the help of local representatives from outlying areas who received a 35% Commission on one dollar annual subscriptions, and George conceived of it as a font of information about an area that was of interest to the country's black population, primarily because of the reputation that the Territory had built regarding available land and less confining workings of race. *The Guide* was distinguished from the other Oklahoma Negro papers publishing at the time by this cross-country presence and vision of a national blackness in search of locations of opportunity signaled by structural addresses of race which did not seek to hold blacks captive.[74]

George followed the suit of the era by including 'seasonable advice' of uplift that aimed to assist blacks in improving their position in the country. Editorial content such as a piece on the Indian Territory Independent Afro American Suffrage League discussed political issues such as the need to develop voting practices within the black community which would make it known to the Republican and Democratic parties that the Negro vote could

[73] Quote taken from a *Guide* renewal letter, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[74] Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p.10.

not be taken for granted. The coming of statehood concerned the local black populace as they feared a further entrenchment of Jim Crow style laws and, believing that 'the white men will have more use for us the minute they discover that they can not use us for their own selfish ends,' the piece noted the League sought to martial a response at the ballot box that would communicate to whites that the area's blacks would 'no longer be slaves to the Republicans nor any other party'[75] George also included content that encouraged members of the race seek out opportunities to establish fruitful relations with whites. *The Guide* carried a speech delivered at the Tuskegee Institute by Booker T. Washington entitled 'A Real Racial Necessity' which mixed admonitory pronouncements about the need to keep black children in school with calls for increased interactions between the leaders of the Negro and white races so as to be 'constantly going forward in making material, educational, moral, and religious progress.'[76] The piece suggested a return to practices wherein black religious leaders invited 'their white brother ministers to preach as often as possible in Negro pulpits' in hopes that 'the leaders of the white people would come into contact with the best element of our people and we could let the white people see the progress we are making, and they could also come into contact with our needs.'[77]

The need for black business progress was also harped on by *The Guide* which mixed a lament about the 'utterly disgusting…lack of business qualifications among negro business men and women…in this immediate locality' with calls for racial solidarity in consumer habits represented by the patronizing of 'your home industries' as opposed to those of

[75] Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[76] 'A Real Racial Necessity,' *The Tulsa Guide*, December 2, 1906, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[77] Ibid.

outsiders.[78] The above collection of stories represents examples of the various strategies for uplift and improvement that George would promote and track for years to come. The presentation of business as a way to build community and establish financial wherewithal was mixed with entreaties to government for fair treatment and interpersonal or intergroup plays focused on building a shared sense of humanity with whites.

The paper ran for several years but George was not interested in deeply devoting himself to the permanence of *The Guide* and, though he claimed to have influenced many blacks to move to the area, including a number of which he personally knew, he eventually allowed it to dissolve without even attempting to sell it as a going concern. George and Perry decided to leave Tulsa altogether at the end of that time so as to relocate to Muskogee as the opportunities for blacks were considered more promising in that town. Tulsa's blacks were all pushed into an area on one side of the railroad tracks and were strictly segregated. Muskogee had some segregation, as well, but the lines between the races were not so well defined in that locale and this diffused any strict separations of the races prior to statehood. The Johnson's migration to the territories, especially Muskogee, and George's decision to remain for several years, can therefore be seen both as attributable to the economic possibilities of the oil boom and the attractiveness of spaces where markers of racial difference were not so well established that the expanse of potential relations necessary for a materially and socially vibrant life was intolerably cramped and defeated. Muskogee had a large black population cross-thatched with membership in the Creek Nation and landed by the fallout of the Dawes allotments.

[78] *The Tulsa Guide*, June 30, 1906, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

African Americans owned thousands of acres, including some oil wells, and the black section of town included good schools, banks, businesses, and theaters. Business was brisk as, in addition to a good deal of land held in the hands of blacks, Muskogee was the seat of the federal government's presence in the Indian Territory, which meant that the population was swelled by the nation's largest accumulation of federal bureaucrats after that found in Washington D.C. These circumstances resulted in the accumulation of a fair amount of wealth in Muskogee's black community.

After allowing *The Guide* to sink below the surface George took up the entrepreneurial thread in Muskogee with a real estate venture, the Johnson Investment Company, which he ran out of the Brown Building on Main Street. George sold lots through the mail valued at between $100 and $200, especially in the North Muskogee addition where, potential buyers were put on notice, the cost of a lot would rise by $25 once half were sold.[79] An initial payment of $10 cash followed by monthly payment's of $5 was good enough get title to any of the lots in North Muskogee. George put together a prospectus that he mailed out to points primarily located in the South as a reliable trickle of African Americans had begun to depart from Dixie during the first decade of the 20th century. The prospectus touted Muskogee as 'The Metropolis of the Southwest' and noted that the city's 30,000 inhabitants, 10,000 of which were Negro, were serviced by relatively extensive water mains, asphalt roads, concrete sidewalks, railways, and other such modernized amenities which helped the area's overall property value reach $13,000,000, as assessed on the 50

[79] Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

percent basis.[80] As the last quote suggests, the prospectus was careful to pepper the information provided with money figures and meaningful details about the black accomplishments of Muskogee. For instance, the dry goods store servicing blacks was noted as holding $40,000 in stock and the bank held $50,000 is deposits while the Negro-owned Palace Clothing Company had begun business with $5,000 in stock and had within a year expanded to $12,500 in product.[81] Just as importantly, Johnson made sure to include background information about the travels that had led the successful black business men of Muskogee to their growing fortunes. W.P. Green was noted as having schooled in Kansas before arriving in Oklahoma via Chicago. The prospectus dangled the fact that Green had taken start-up money in the amount of $300 and turned it into 'the largest and best equipped studio in the Southwest.' [82] Muskogee's Negro pharmacist, Dr. A. E. Johnson (no relation) had come to Muskogee from Michigan and had seen the value of his in-stock goods grow ten-fold, from $300 to $3,000. These figures refer to a source of authority and meaning that translated across the country, namely the value of money, and such allowed Johnson to flash the victories blacks had experienced in Muskogee in terms which did not simply rely on overtures of race while connecting the activity in Johnson's city to a growing national circuitry of African Americans who were still in the early stages of using migration to test the bounds of the American dream. Muskogee was thriving and

[80] Ibid. An assessed value is usually lower than the market value, so, in this instance, it is likely that the market value of Muskogee's property was $26,000,000.
[81] Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[82] Ibid.

the pamphlet made sure to note in great detail that Negroes held positions and ran businesses of every imaginable sort.[83]

Jane Gaines briefly addressed George Johnson's time in Muskogee in *Fire and Desire*, her study of mixed-race films, and she noted the prospectus' enumeration of black services and businesses in order to suggest that the all-black film industry that George and Noble would eventually help to kick off presented utopian visions of all-black living that were based on the idea of places like Muskogee, 'black towns' wherein African Americans could prosper beyond the yolk of white power.[84] As Gaines points out, the Johnson Investment Company brochure laundry lists an array of black-owned or –controlled businesses and services with the effect being a vision of a town that allowed blacks to be self-sufficient.[85] However, it must be added that this list follows others which describe Muskogee on the whole and thereby place the city's Negro population and their endeavors within the spread of interactions and opportunities that stem from the mixedness of Muskogee's commercial and social realms. Johnson neither heralds an all-black town nor a race-neutral arena of equality. Rather, the prospectus lists a wide range of opportunities in order to demonstrate that the lives of 'The Colored Citizens of Muskogee,' as the most specified representatives of the target audience's potential cohort were described, were as full as those of whites.[86]

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[83] Ibid.
[84] Jane Gaines, *Fire and Desire: Mixed Race Movies in the Silent Era* (Chicago, Ill., University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 137-138.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

George's efforts to attract southern blacks to Muskogee clearly led him to speak to their sense of blackness as derived from a shared sense of experiences with oppression and the limited material opportunities that often existed under those circumstances. In that sense he was addressing an affiliative sense of racial identity. He was also holding forth the promise of being able to live among other materially successful blacks, which can be read as a nod to black desires to live with their own as defined by affiliative or filiative ties, which is to say ties based on a belief that blacks were of a family with shared biological traits and backgrounds.[87] This was not simply an expression of a desire for or a ploy to cash in on black yearnings for all-black living. Work was noted as being plentiful and the fairness of the labor and business markets was advertised with promises that 'every man's success here is measured by his own efforts and will be great or small in proportion to the energy and ability put into his business efforts.'[88] This assurance came directly after the listing of black businesses and services and prepared the reader for a more in depth look at some of the stories behind Muskogee's Negro business successes.

As the black population of 10,000 was consistently noted as being part of, which is to say effectively *among*, the overall population of 30,000, which in turn was noted as supporting the blood pressure of the city's businesses, including those of its black residences, the overall effect of the prospectus was a call to black yearnings for spaces wherein race, not just white power, was not the guiding principle behind the success or

[87] Race as based on ideas of coalition (what I here refer to as affiliative) and biological kinship (what I call filiative) are common in dialogues of race theory and can be found in various places within that literature, e.g., Edouard Machery and Luc Faucher, 'Social Construction and the Concept of Race,' *Philosophy of Science* 72 (2005), pp. 1208-1219.
[88] Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

failure of an individual Negro's ambitions and for locales where the black presence was significant enough to carry some force.[89]

Muskogee's growth stagnated over the years immediately after Oklahoma became a state due to the closure of the area's federal governmental offices as the administration of Indian Affairs resettled in Washington D.C. George, who had begun a serious relationship with a teacher, Rose Dale, and was thinking about settling into family life, decided to depart from Muskogee just a few years after his arrival due to another aspect of Oklahoma's 1907 statehood: the hardening of southernization and attention to prohibitions based on race. Statehood approached and the battle lines between Republicans and Democrats included the question of suffrage and civil rights for the Negroes of the territories. The Democrats were able to rally white supremacist political support, in part because of the power of blacks in places like Muskogee, and they managed a commanding majority of delegates to the 1906 state constitutional convention. The result was the election of William H. 'Alfalfa Bill' Murray to the presidency of that body.[90] Murray was a virulently, uncompromisingly racist man of the South who at no time worried his expressions of violent antipathy toward blacks. The politics of the region began to follow suit and George tired of being subjected to the southern habits regarding race relations.

As Jim Crow took hold in Muskogee, Johnson found the constant pressure to keep the public presence of blacks confined and separated from whites unacceptable. The blurred boundaries of race and ethnicity that were in the Territory, along with property rights

[89] Ibid.
[90] Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance: The Tulsa Race War and its Legacy*, p.43.

practices which tended to encourage the bleed of blackness, Indian-ness, and whiteness into one another, transformed from a point of attraction and opportunity to one which fomented the negative attentions of officials charged with making Muskogee's denizens comply with segregation. Johnson explained the situation by discussing the troubles he began to encounter on the trolleys of Muskogee. George explained that Rose's mother and her aunt's husband appeared white, and when they went about town as a group dilemmas surfaced around their ability to share public spaces. The streetcar conductor utilized a sliding sign that designated the separation of the spaces for whites and non-whites. When George and his in-laws would ride the streetcar the conductor constantly attempted to divide the group up according to the hue of their skin, a disruption of the group's social interaction that they fought against regularly.[91]

Johnson identified everyone in this collection of relations as being 'colored,' and he gave no indications that they thought of themselves as something other than people of color, so it is interesting to note that the conductor often tried to separate them rather than move the lot of them to the section set aside for blacks. In short, it appears that Johnson and his group refused to play the race game by announcing where they fit into the Jim Crow universe. Instead they argued and contested the attempts to implement the logics of race that aimed to force them into racialized public identities. The private identities held by the members of Johnson's Muskogee circle, certainly made up in part by an affiliative sense of shared blackness stemming from the oppression crushing the group together into fields of shared experience and in part by affiliative sense connected to

[91] Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History.'

marriage, seemed to have rejected publicly practiced blackness where such was defined and restricted by participation in Jim Crow. This group, accustomed to certain freedoms from racialized categorization afforded by the realities of racial intermixture in the territories, tried to hold their ground by refusing to perform blackness or race in the stead of their personal relations and desires for expressions of those relations, i.e., sitting next to one another on a streetcar.

Johnson indicated that whites, Indians, and blacks were so intermarried in Oklahoma that trying to apply the Jim Crow program to that state's population was in many instances hopelessly absurd. George recalled that intermarriage between races was not considered a disqualifier for state office, as one of the state senators was married to a black woman, and this suggests that he saw efforts to institute strict, official divisions between the races as a change of operative power that made interrelations between the races less manageable and continued residence in Muskogee unpalatable. Fatigued by constantly being forced to challenge Jim Crow rules on behalf of his sense of self and disheartened by turns of event in Oklahoma which worked to close off opportunity for blacks, opportunities that George seemed to associate with the workings of racial ambiguity and the possibility of lax strictures regarding relations between the races, George alighted for Omaha, Nebraska. Oklahoma had become the 'Deep South' and migration was the option selected.

George chose to move to Omaha, Nebraska, because he had heard that race prejudice was minimal in that city and the winter weather was less extreme than that found in another city then noted for some degree of racial tolerance, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Omaha boasted a swelling black population which grew from about 3,500 in 1900 to just

over 10,300 in 1920, essentially doubling over the last half of that time frame as African Americans migrated both from the South and Midwestern terminal cities such as Chicago in order to take advantage of the employment options in the city's meat packing and railway industries.[92] George was aware that the blacks of Omaha were segregated into specific parts of town but the effects of racism and segregation were relative and the fact that, though less than top-tier, there were through to the 1920s consistent employment opportunities for black Omahans meant the presence of a rising black middle class, including professionals like physicians and attorneys, and pockets of comfortable living in comely homes which proved adequate to draw Johnson's relocation to that spot. [93]

In Omaha George decided to seek work in the post office and decided that the path to a coveted clerk's position, a job to that point unavailable to blacks, was to develop a relationship with a source of authority and power which might overcome prejudices in the postal service's hiring practices. The family name of Brandeis carried a great deal of clout in the Omaha area in the first decade or so of the 20th century as it was connected with the ownership of Omaha's largest theater and a department store concern, both of which bore the family name. The Brandeis family business, which would grow overtime to locations that spanned the Midwest and East Coast, built their fortune through providing the region's pinnacle of consumer experiences and using the profits to build good will through philanthropy, civic works, involvement in cultural organizations, especially those connected with Omaha's Jewish population, and pouring profits back into he family

[92] Lawrence Harold Larsen, *Upstream Metropolis: An Urban Biography of Omaha and Council Bluffs* (Lincoln, Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press, 2007) pp. 216-219.
[93] Ibid.

businesses and real estate.[94] Former VP Helmuth Dahlke reminisced, "Brandeis ran this town…in the heyday Brandeis pretty much controlled every corner of downtown Omaha, strategically, so that no one could move in. They controlled the real estate…owned the buildings, the properties. When we wanted something we called and one minute later they called you back. We had muscle."[95]

George went to the head of the Brandeis family, likely Arthur Brandeis, to ask for work.[96] Brandeis surmised that Johnson had experiences and a sense of his own ability that would not accept the kind of work he was willing to give a Negro and he flatly stated that work as a clerk in the department store was not available for a person of color. Johnson implored that Brandeis give him whatever work was open as he was in financial straits. A janitorial position was found and George accepted. Brandeis informed George that he would help the young man obtain any better position which George might be able to elsewhere find and so, while continuing with his janitorial duties, Johnson took the Post Office exam, placing eighth out of 50 or so applicants. George returned to Brandeis with these results and requested that Brandeis 'send the postmaster a little letter' supporting his hire as a clerk.[97] Brandeis summoned his stenographer and dictated a letter the

[94] Leo Adam Biga, 'Brandeis Story: Great Plains Family-Owned Department Store Empire,' http://leoadambiga.wordpress.com/2010/06/07/the-brandeis-story-a-family-owned-department-store-empire-of-the-great-plains/.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History.' Johnson indicated that he went to see J.L. Brandeis, the founder of the family business, but this seem unlikely as records suggest that J.L. Brandeis died in 1903. J.L. Brandeis' son, Arthur, took over the company's presidency after his father's death, so it seems most likely that Arthur was the individual with whom George would have had dealings when in Omaha.
[97] Ibid.

content of which George was never aware. The result was unmistakable, however, as he was called to work as Omaha's first Negro postal clerk on the following Monday.

This request for sponsorship puts on display a strategic engagement of shared values and humanity that was employed to subject the directives of racial prejudice to an alternate, more persuasive authority which did not proceed along lines that used blackness as a disqualifier. Johnson's confidence in an ability to open social and then economic opportunities in this fashion had to be considerable as he pressed ahead with his ploy even after the source of the crucial alternate authority initially adhered to the very racialized strictures that the young would-be clerk sought to undermine. The delicate balance between accepting dead-end manual labor, presenting self as too polished and capable to be expected to do so, and establishing a relationship with power which privileged that latter picture of one's ability was key to George effecting a relationship with Brandeis that later bore the exact fruit that Johnson sought, an imprimatur from whiteness that set out his ability as a person instead of his race.

This victory was no doubt held in check by ceilings and walls that kept Johnson's hire as a postal clerk from being a complete triumph. George's capitulation to the limits of Brandeis' ability to see public blackness as commercially viable in a setting primarily concerned with catering to white consumer needs was part of the bedrock upon which his receipt of favor from Brandeis was based. The achievement of a clerking position with the postal office was a breakthrough nonetheless, a notable win over the limits set by racism which attacked the issue at one of the problem's core spots, the control over relationships between the races, and the success of his careful, patient planning constituted an instance

of discursive intervention into the modes and practices underpinning race and the most immediate material impacts of those practices. George reported having had no problems with co-workers and noted that he wielded authority over whites while rising to 'top man in the post office' by the time he moved from Omaha.[98] George would remain in Omaha seven or eight years before again succumbing to the pull of the West and migratory actions aimed at entrepreneurial endeavor.

Passing Out of the Picture: Virgel Johnson

Perry Johnson's oldest boy, Virgel, was born in Marshall, Missouri on March 6, 1879. The young man received minimal education at an otherwise all-white Colorado Springs elementary school. Virgel instead learned the horseman's trade at his father's side while trying his hand at other methods of earning such as mining for gold in Victor and Cripple Creek and farming on 160 acres of land Perry had homesteaded.[99] Noble and Virgel would plant corn in a yeoman's fashion and, if it rained enough to support a crop, they would return for the harvest.[100] Virgel led a hardscrabble youth of very little play and a great deal of seriousness that was abetted by a tireless energy for hard work and a good deal of ingenuity. Once while working as a coachman he clipped the bob-tailed horses by suspending a bicycle, hooking up the chain to the shears, and having George pedal to provide power.[101] Like Noble, he travelled around seeking work experiences and making contacts. Virgel met his wife, Mable, during his itinerant time in the Dakotas or Minnesota.

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[98] Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 12.
[99] Ibid., p. 245.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid., p. 244.

Virgel and Mable were very light skinned and straight of hair, fair enough to pass for white.

Virgel was known in Colorado Springs to have been a Negro as he was recognized throughout the region as 'Perry Johnson's boy.'[102] Nonetheless, he and Noble had only white playmates, including Lon Chaney, who, like Noble, would build a Hollywood career during the silent era. Virgel was not often around blacks as the family did not reside in the black areas of town and he did not go out of his way to associate with others of the race. George would later explain that he and his brothers, including Virgel, were simply more comfortable in the company of whites as they had grown up in all-white Ivywild surrounded by the most privileged examples of whiteness in the area. The Johnsons did not really participate in the black community's social interactions as they did not work with or go to school or church with other blacks. George noted that 'we didn't know much about them, we didn't know their habits – our habits were always white.'[103] The social demands of segregation created for the Johnsons a sense of removal from the culture of the Colorado Springs black community and worked to retard the early development of a strong tie between being a person of color and an identity that was based in a shared experience of being treated in a common fashion due to being black. For the Johnsons, though they recognized that they were considered to be black by the society at large and shared that mark with other blacks, their primary source of identity formation was not forged in that affiliative sense of blackness and they did not initially consider any shared biological traits as a sufficient source of identification. The Johnson boys were black and

[102] Ibid.
[103] Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 254, 255.

yet considered the other blacks of Colorado Springs as 'them,' which is to say as a group whose corporate aspects differed from their own.

There is no available information regarding the inner workings of Virgel Johnson's mind upon learning that he was considered to be a black man, but he had to have at some point in his youth come to the understanding that being black had, at least in his case, no real connection with his appearance and that, as a result, his blackness was a matter of the way others, whites and blacks, read his biological and affiliative ties to family. There were no strong or necessary ties to or investment in the culture or appearance of blackness for the lightly-complected Virgel, so, when he decided that, as a man, he wanted to travel to wherever opportunity seemed most available, and because, according to George, as a *colored* man 'there was nothing for him,' he decided to begin passing for white in order to benefit from that position.[104] George recounted that 'he wasn't considering himself as particularly passing, or anything,' but rather, Virgel had just been doing 'what he wanted to do.'[105]

> He acted like a white man and talked like a white man and he never had the attitude at all. He didn't have the fear. Now, the colored who has been a colored man and is trying to pass for white has a certain amount of timidness. He isn't ever sure of himself. Virge hadn't been a Negro at all in his whole life; he never grew up as a Negro.[106]

Virgel's appearance did not out him as black and his experiences as a person did not moor him to affiliations or performances of a blackness that might have closed his horizons. Consequently, once Virgel departed from the Pike's Peak region 'there was no

[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid., p. 256.
[106] Ibid., p. 260.

reason why he should call himself a colored man and try to go around and be with the colored when there was no opportunity for it and they couldn't help him any.'[107]

The cultural, contingent, and arbitrary nature of race is on full display in these quotes from George, and there is a fascinating set of dynamics connecting blackness and perceptions of limitation with the complicated process of building an identity. Virgel is described in these quotes as having never been a Negro, though the entire discussion revolved around his passing from Negro status to another, and, though he was noted as having decided upon that path, he was also said to have made little in the way of efforts aimed at producing whiteness. The stickiness of race, of one's knowledge of self and the context of having that self to one degree or another effected by others, creates a confusion in George's attempts to explain his brother, to illuminate the shadowy movements of his oldest brother's perceptions of self. Virgel did not create the overarching social circumstances of his life and he did not attempt to change them. It has been suggested that a person that can pass actually has to do nothing other than fail to signal blackness, which indicates that race is not what one is, per se, but what one does, thinks, emotes and acts out, and how those actions are read in the realms of interpersonal interaction.[108] George's reference to the seemingly redundant 'colored man who has been a colored man' indicates he fully understood the necessity of being located in the role of blackness, that being black and knowing oneself to be someone with a background that constituted blackness was not

[107] Ibid., p. 255.
[108] Adrian Piper, 'Passing for White, Passing for Black,' in Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 554. Piper noted that a 'white person' who had black African ancestry would have to 'assume' and 'acknowledge' their blackness. They would have to fend off whiteness as the default position.

necessarily enough to 'be black.' As Michel Foucault has noted, the disciplinary power that race holds over human relationships effects over its 'subjects a principle of compulsory visability.'[109] To truly be black one had to have been seen as black and, to an extent, to have seen others seeing ones self as black.

George's curious phrase, which suggested that Virgel was a 'colored man who had not been a colored man,' teaches us a couple of things about George's view of race and how it worked in America. First, for George, being black was something that was placed on the person, something that had to be assigned or affixed from without. This meant that blackness was primarily conceptual for George, and perhaps his brothers, as well, and that race as a dynamic of power entering into human relations had to crest certain hurdles of intentionality in order to be active. Blackness could be both chosen or ineluctable. Blackness as a concept had to be understood and then claimed or applied as a fact on the ground but the basis for knowing who to apply it to was not always clear. There was room for maneuvers, movement. While this aspect of race and blackness came to light because the country's attempts through the one drop rule to completely separate the races over-reached into conceptual areas which included under the roof of blackness traits that could not be easily detected, the real kernel of George's view seems to have been that choice was involved, that it was possible to be in circumstances wherein race was not the selected or preferred mode. Frantz Fanon howled that his blackness, his very appearance unavoidably tied him to over determination and that 'the "ideas" that others have' were not really at

[109] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 187.

issue in his being black.[110] George Johnson, on the other hand, seems to have acknowledged the dynamics of race and blackness noted by Fanon while also believing that the concept, the idea, the values and interests of the other, were also part of the equation.

The above quote about colored men who have been colored men also lets us know that George primarily thought of blackness in the interracial setting as a mark of limitation, an assigned identity or role that set the colored man out for abuse, neglect, and ill will. Therefore, in America, as a default position, to *be* black was to suffer, to absorb mistreatment and rejection. If a colored man had been a colored man he would be timid when trying to go beyond the limits, neglect, and abuse. Such was matter of definition in the social atmospheres of a nation with so much violence and horror behind the maintenance of the color line. Getting beyond the abuse and timidity in the interracial world involved at least two options for George: avoiding detection or location as a black person, as a person that filled that role, or finding spaces and relationships wherein the choices made adhered to values and interests that played out along lines other than race. George could not avoid detection, so he engaged mobility based in finding or making spaces that moved beyond race. Virgel could avoid detection, so he moved away from his family and the only markers that fixed him to blackness. The conceptual aspects of blackness and race seem to have been known to Virgel and rejected. He couldn't be located or forced to suffer for his connections to blackness, so, according to George's definition, and maybe his own, he wasn't black. He could have signaled his blackness, claimed it and

[110] Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 116.

announced it, and thereby avoided living as a white man. Virgil Johnson did not make any such announcements.

Still, as Erving Goffman has suggested in his *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, one is always performing some aspect of one's multi-faceted and circumstantially oriented identity, and in that light Virgel was indeed forced to actively present his whiteness, to go amongst whites as a white in order reap the benefits of whiteness.[111] He was required to continue to haunt the realms of interpersonal relations in America wherein narratives of race could under certain circumstances affix blackness to him and thereby change the way power relations effected his well being. In a time where lethal violence was all too commonly aimed at black bodies in the name of enforcing the imbalances of power endemic to raced relations, Virgel had reason to fear being located as a black man, and as race welled up from his relations with others, he had to carefully manicure his interactions so that any loose ends leading back to blackness were kept from the sight of his life in Arkansas. The advantages of being white in the Jim Crow South could quickly evaporate and be replaced by the disadvantages of a blackness guilty of violations of raced relations the boundaries of which were policed by lethal force. 'Be Careful. Never give.' Those were the words Virgel would communicate to the family when directing their communications.[112] He could visit his brothers only sporadically and this interference with family was Virgel's only lasting regret from his decision to leave blackness behind. His position was something to be guarded and obscured from the surveillance that both races

[111] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1959).
[112] Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 258.

practiced along the borders of blackness and whiteness. In addition to the family omitting return addresses which might have been recognized by whites or blacks in Arkansas as geographic sites associated with blackness, Virgel could not associate with blacks and he may have avoided having children with Mabel for fear of birthing a tell.

The family had to be concerned because they perceived that there was 'always somebody that is trying to do something or trying to get it,' which is to say there was always some contingent watching the boundaries that might 'lay a trap for him.'[113] The Johnsons understood that race was derived from external realms that they could not completely control and that they had to police themselves so that Virgel could escape detection. While he was not needlessly cruel to his Negro employees, he could not afford to associate with them lest some suspicions arise. In one instance wherein a black man working for Virgel made a comment that in some way called Virgel's distance from blackness into question, Virgel struck the man, knocking him down, and then discharged him from his position of employment.[114] The prerogatives of whiteness along the borders of the racialized interpersonal relations of that time had to be taken up in order to maintain Virgel's safety and those prerogatives were violence and the denial of a means of material support. The upkeep of power had to reach deeply into the offender's life, into the space between himself and the locus of dominance, and in Little Rock that locus was a whiteness that brooked no such challenge.

Virgel's spasm of physical self-defense reached across the supposed divide of whiteness and blackness and demonstrated that individuals on both sides were forced to

[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid., p. 259, 260.

surveil and suffer surveillance. Had Virgel not applied the white privilege of violent retribution he would have failed to fulfill the role of a white man in such a scenario and might have thereby invited the mark of blackness into his life. James Scott has indicated in his *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* that part of a dominant class' maintenance of power was wrapped up in public performance that is demanded by the relationship between the powerful and those without.[115] Whiteness has to act out and bee seen. Such might have in turn led the narrative of race to enter his relations with the Arkansas power structure in such a way that the violence maintaining the borders of race would have been turned on him. George indicated that such a development 'would have closed him out of business and they might have killed him.'[116] Virgel's violent outburst was undertaken to protect his physical well being and his class position which was, in turn, based on his claim to whiteness and intimately entwined with designs on upper middle class living via a myriad of business connections.

Both Virgel and Mabel appear to have felt it necessary to scramble their past in order to solidify their primary identities as white citizens of Arkansas. The aforementioned 1910 census, and all such subsequent records, listed Virgel and Mabel as white with his name

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[115] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 45-69. Scott's book looks at the many ways that the dialogue between the empowered and the powerless is carried on over an undercurrent of often overlooked transcripts that are not public. In the instance of Virgel striking the black laborer for saying something about passing, Virgel had to calculate looking guilty by acting out or failing to live up to his role as a powerful white by forgoing a violent response. The scene suggests that there was a question about Virgel's racial makeup, that the labor knew but also could not bring it out for fear of the very turn of events George recounted. The colored man who is a white man being accused of being colored acts out that specialized realm of privilege and power, violence, and maintains whiteness.

[116] Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 258.

being spelled 'Virgil.' Virgel stated that he was born in Mexico to a mother also from Mexico and a father from Missouri. Mabel indicated that her mother was from Iowa and her father from New York. In 1920 the census entry for Virgel indicated that his father was born in Indiana and that he and his mother were born in New Mexico. Mabel's entry indicated that her father was from New York and her mother from England. By 1930 Virgel would again list his father's birthplace as Missouri and the birthplace of his mother and himself as New Mexico. New Mexico would remain his official place of birth for the 1940 census and on his draft registration card of 1942.[117] These shifting details regarding the origins of Virgel's family reflect the project of holding the fixative of blackness at bay, the efforts required to maintain an identity free to move about unencumbered by the social and economic ceilings attendant to being black in America.

The identity that Virgel made for himself, that he recognized in himself, was deeply tied to achieving material comfort and security through business endeavors which both accentuated his individual skills as commodifiable bases upon which to build commercial ambitions and provided tender for the interpersonal aspects of business transactions. In other words, his identity was profoundly tied to his intentions as a business man and those intentions required that he be seen by others as a viable individual with whom to enter business relations and that those with whom he dealt be able to reciprocate by providing opportunities for Virgel's designs on profit. According to George, Virgel did not see optimal potentiality in the realms where blackness overlaid business intentions and relations. There was nothing for him in the world of blackness and he had no expectation

[117] Virgel Johnson Draft Registration Card, 1942.

that relations with blacks as a black would be able to satisfy his personal ambitions. This suggests that Virgel's sense of investment in an identity was at least in part driven by his understanding of the chances for profitability stemming from the relations represented by and likely to arise from his self as presented, including his racial standing. The self as a negotiated identity, a set of understandings about the self-achieved in part through interactions with others, was necessarily affected by Virgel's interest in business.

By the time of Virgel's arrival in Arkansas the state had a nasty history of violence and oppression aimed at African Americans, especially in the delta region of the state's Northwest corner. The lynching of blacks was not uncommon and a fervent intolerance for African-American assertions of self-determination and equality permeated the culture of the Delta region. The ultimate expression of that anti-black savagery occurred in 1919 in the town of Elaine, Arkansas where an untold number of blacks were slaughtered in one of the nation's worst race riots.[118] Race relations in the Little Rock area were less dire and the blacks of the capital city, whose numbers in the U.S. Census hovered consistently at about one-third of the overall population from 1870 until the 1920s, were able to establish a small but growing middle class community with several black businesses, a busy black fraternal group, the Mosaic Templars of America, and three black colleges.[119] Still,

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[118] For an excellent recap of the Elaine Race Riot, as well as the general history of racial violence in the state of Arkansas, see Richard Cortner, *A Mob Intent on Death: The NAACP and the Arkansas Riot Cases* (Middletown, CT: Weslyan University Press, 1988), and Grif Stockley, *Blood in Their Eyes: The Elaine Race Massacres of 1919* (Fayettville, Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 2001).

[119] Little Rock, Arkansas population information for the period spanning 1870-1900 were taken from John William Graves, *Town and Country: Race Relations in an Urban-Rural Context, Arkansas, 1865-1905* (Fayetteville, Arkansas, University of Arkansas Press,

aggressions were not constrained to the Delta region. Conflagrations of vicious attacks against blacks flared throughout the state in the first two decades of the 20th century, as evidenced by 1905 and 1909 paroxysms of 'racial cleansing' in the northeastern Arkansas town of Harrison.[120]

One can question why Virgel would move to the South and place himself in a situation wherein the jeopardy attendant to being outed as a black man was most acute. Virgel was not, however, moving to Arkansas as a black man so it was quite possible that part of the decision to move to the South was prompted by the knowledge that whiteness might be at its most powerful or in receipt of the greatest deference within the embrace of Jim Crow. Little Rock boomed during the years following the turn of the century as Arkansas' rural populations saw many of their number drawn to the capital's vibrant urban center. Construction projects abounded as Little Rock was plotted and expanded by new residential areas and roadways. Indeed, the entire state saw a flurry of road-building activity as Arkansas struggled to modernize.[121]

George later stated that he had not known exactly why his oldest brother decided to migrate in the direction of racial oppression's most comfortable holds, though, in contemplating Virgel's ability to quickly establish himself in a position which received enviable governmental contracts in the years immediately leading to the nation's move into the first World War, George suggested that it was most likely the promise of a deal

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1990),103; the population information for Little Rock from 1910, 1920,and 1930, were taken from the *U.S. Census* for each respective year.

[120] Stockley, *Blood in Their Eyes,* pp. 5-7.

[121] Carl Moneyhon, *Arkansas and the New South, 1874-1929* (Fayetteville, Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 1997).

that led Virgel to Little Rock. George recounted vague details of Virgel's decampment from the Pike's Peak region to Arkansas and indicated such was spurred by a friendship with a well-connected white who helped to put Virgel in position to receive lucrative governmental contracts. However, Virgel and Mabel moved to Little Rock in about 1910 and his census entry from that year indicated he was employed in a livery stable. By 1912 he was the vice president of the Kraft Transfer & Coal Company, excavating contractors capitalized at $25,000, with C.L. Kraft as the president.[122] The C.L. Kraft Company of Little Rock Arkansas was a livery business, so it seems more than likely that the livery for whom Virgel worked in 1910 was the C.L. Kraft Company, or that, at the very least, he met Kraft through the Livery business.[123] George's account of Virgel's move to Arkansas was admittedly derived from imperfect information and it appears that, while Virgel may have had standing offers of business opportunities in Little Rock which drew him southward, his eventual entry into the 'rough and tumble' construction business both as a provider of materials, especially stones from quarries he purchased, and as the builder of roads, levees, and other projects that revolved around displacing and repurposing earth, arose as much from the networks he built out of horsemanship, his prior extractive experiences in Colorado, and applied business sense as from any associations he might have come across before moving to Arkansas.[124]

Once underway, Virgel began sinking his energies into various businesses that grew his name and prowess. Rock excavated from a quarry initially purchased in 1912 was used

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[122] *Fuel: The Progressive Coal Magazine*, May 7, 1912, Vol. XIX, No.1, p. 101.
[123] *C.L. Kraft Company v. Grubbs*, Arkansas Supreme Court, Vol. 116, 2/1/1915.
[124] 1910 United States Census.

for various projects, including shipments to points west such as Galveston, Texas. A May 1, 1913 letter from Mabel indicated that Virgel had won a contract building the levees and setting out roads in Cotton Plant, Arkansas.[125] By the time he pulled a large contract with the U.S. Army for the 1917 construction of levees and Camp Pike, coincidentally named after the man who also named Pike's Peak, General Zebulon M. Pike, Virgel was already established in the Little Rock area as a leader in the rough and tumble construction game.[126] The Little Rock Chamber of Commerce had offered the government the land and the lease for the Camp Pike free of charge and then raised the money for the lands via donations. The land and lease was accomplished for $500,000 and, with 10,000 men working the project, overall construction costs came in at about $13,000,000.[127] It is not clear how much Johnson personally profited from the building of Camp Pike, but Virgel's ability to access federal dollars and the visibility that came with participating in such a prestigious construction project helped him to continue to expand or turnover new business endeavors as he shortly thereafter started both the Johnson Team & Dray Company and the Reaves Transfer Company, in which he was the president. The latter venture advertised in the local phonebook 'We Move Anything,' which gives off a whiff of small-time scrambling for work that belies Virgel's continual rise as a businessman and community profile.[128]

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[125] Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 246.
[126] Ibid., p. 256.
[127] 'Camp Jospeh T. Robinson,' *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=2262
[128] Little Rock, Arkansas Phone Book, 1922.

By 1942 Virgel supplied materials from quarries and sand plants for the building of Cammack Village, a federally subsidized housing project which was set aside for white residents only, a 'sundown town' where blacks were to be absent after business hours.[129] A letter recounted by George indicated that Virgel's business was involved in building 117 homes valued in the range of $8,750 to $9,750 per unit and another 87 priced at $4,150 per unit. This totaled about $1.4 million of the Cammack Project's $7 million budget. A few years later the location of the spent quarry was made available for the creation of the Rivercliff Apartments. The apartments were connected with a $1.2 million expenditure, and Virgel was also undertaking work on a shopping center that was budgeted for $1.5 million.[130] He was quoted by George as wondering why he had taken on the $2.7 million in business as such constituted 'just that many headaches,' and he didn't need the money or experience.[131]

Passing for white meant a vast world of fecund business relationships opened for Virgel, including those which had placed him in a position to exercise authority over the labor of whites and blacks, including a white servant for his home.[132] He was able to achieve considerable material accumulations both in terms of money and property, real and otherwise. On a personal level the decision to live as a white person offered some clarity in that Virgel was able to sculpt a life that more closely reflected the person he considered himself to be. Virgel's businesses were successful enough that he was able to

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[129] Brummett, John. "A Town of Its Own." *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. October 2, 1998, pp. 1E, 4E.
[130] Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 248, 249.
[131] Ibid.
[132] 1930 United States Census.

live in a white colonial mansion with a white servant woman attending to the needs of that home, and a retirement wherein he would keep busy with membership in the Searcy, Arkansas Kiwanis club, raising livestock, and selling lots at between $1,000 and $3,000 per piece from a large parcel of land he had previously purchased.[133]

Mabel passed away in 1934 and subsequent to spending some time as a widower; Virgel married and spent his retirement with a white woman, a Texas widow of some means who had been friends with Mabel.[134] Virgel was stricken with a terminal illness in 1966, likely lung cancer, and died on March 9, 1967, just a few days after his 88th birthday. The notice for the services were published in a local newspaper and heralded V.C. 'Blackey' Johnson as a 'well-known retired Searcy businessman' and a 'unique and sincere Christian who had lived a long, colorful life.'[135] His pallbearers included Arkansas State Senator James Edward Lightle, a named partner in one of Searcy's preeminent and politically connected law firms, and one of town's most respected physicians, Porter R. Rodgers. Virgel's position in life was that of a successful white entrepreneur and he embraced what might be considered the typical attitude of his class where issues of labor and the working class were involved. Hard work, thrift, and independence of decision making and action were paramount values and he saw little of those traits in the men and women who comprised Little Rock's lower classes. He wrote to George of his interactions with laborers and organized labor and his strategies demonstrated a pronounced sense of

[133] Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' 251. Information regarding the servant in Virgel's home came from the 1930 U.S. Census.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Microfilm, Box 52, GPJ Collection.

disdain for the efforts of those workers and a definite comfort with using the power of his position to squeeze the most favorable results from his employees:

> Have lots of people living in the new houses and lots waiting to get in and none of them can afford to live in these houses. Most of them now broke and in normal times they have not brains enough to earn enough to live in tents. Lots of idle men and women here now. Lots of strikers, hijacking, pan handling, and drawing on Government. No one wants to work and very few know how. All think the Government owes them a good time living. Don't know + Don't worry when, where or how it will all end up. My work is 100% union and…all ways on strike working only about 1/3 time and never have enough money to pay their union dues. I won't let them work any over-time and as their (sic) a plenty of men I will only let them make 30 hrs per week any time. Hence my double shift. and due to this fact the union gives them permits to work on my job when out on strike and they charge the suckers $5.00 each in addition to their dues for work permits. They get and ask more pay per hour every day. We pay it and give them less hours per week. They don't get half as much per month. We get fresh and good men but keep them broke.[136]

The above quote captures Virgel's fealty to fundamental business class values. His lack of respect for the collective efforts of working class men, laboring over the heavy equipment and earthen spoils of his business endeavors, permeates the whole passage and communicates a highly developed investment in the machinations and logics of America as a site of capitalist power relations. Part of that haughty attitude apparently stemmed from his ability to get striking workers to put in hours on his project while at the same time refusing to allow them earnings that might lead them to the type of independence that he so cherished. His power over his workers and his immunity to their efforts to negotiate more returns on their labor relieved him of any need to view their position from a vantage

[136] Ibid.

other than his own, and he conveniently explained to himself and George that their position of powerlessness was due to a lack of intellectual and moral strength rather than his own ruthless, naked advantage in maintaining them on schedules that kept their bodies ready for work and their financial circumstances desperately in need of his jobs. While the ultimate goal achieved by Virgel in his life of business as a white man can be located in his retirement under circumstances of security and comfort, leisurely lording over his livestock and property as a respected member of his community of well-to-do citizens, the above quote can be read as a sort of ultimate expression of the attitudes and values that earned him his position in retirement and, as such, it speaks to the nature of that community and the actions undertaken to gain entry therein.

Virgel's project of passing, of living a white life, was directly and inextricably connected with the business practices and attitudes on display in the aforementioned quote. He proffered himself to the world as a white man in order to gain access to the material and social opportunities available to whiteness and he correctly ascertained that he would not have enjoyed those opportunities had he been known as a black man. Michael Omi and Howard Winant put forth the classic iteration of race as a cultural construct. Race as a cultural construct arises in the realms of interpersonal relations informed by language, interests, and values, which constitute narratives and histories that signify the meaning that difference will have in those relationships, which is to say the meaning that difference will have for imbalances of power as such come into play between individuals and groups of people. Race must be constructed, recognized and confirmed, learned, reinforced, performed, vetted, and even legislated, and as a construct at play in

the realm of interpersonal relations, race competes with other narratives and histories packed with their own logics, languages, interests, and values.[137]

With that in mind, the connection between the above quote from Virgel and race is not that being or living as a white necessitated such an attitude, or that such attitudes are exclusively the domain of perspectives lived in whiteness. Rather, the primary dynamic was one wherein the structure of relationships and transactions connected with entrepreneurial success were effected by the values and practices of the nation's racist and classist legal and cultural codes, and, under such circumstances, the decision-making power was culturally and legally played out in ways that assisted the maintenance of raced versions of class-based attitudes regarding work, accumulation, self-reliance, and collective activity. In other words, the structures of the cultural, legal, and economic systems in which Virgel operated were such that, where the headroom for entrepreneurial growth and success were concerned, opportunities increased if one were white as the narratives and histories that forwarded those structures attached whiteness to the practices and protocols of that growth and success and attempted to shore up the racial dynamic by expunging blackness from those activities and narratives.

Virgel's perspective was informed by roots in a family that cherished self-sufficiency in the context of entrepreneurial ventures. This family position was also an expression of connection to the American national project in the sense that American values surrounding the sanctity of property and democratic values extend from ideas of self-sufficiency as a metric of readiness for the responsibilities and wherewithal for

[137] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

citizenship. Another way of looking at the Johnson family where materialism and business intersect is to see them as aspirants to ever-higher reaches within the nation's class structure and adherents of much of the dominant narratives and histories that held up that structure. The father and his sons recognized that much of the weight and meaning of race arose in the cultural interstices that existed between the various points of interpersonal relations. When George later stated that 'That has always been my trouble. You see, I've been raised, trained, all my habits were white. I talk that, I act that, I was trained that' he was in part pointing out the constructed nature of race and racism, and in part lamenting the difficulty of fully melding a self that sought to live beyond the trappings of raced divisions.[138] The Johnsons also recognized that class and race were connected and that the connection was often one which sought to exclude blackness. The flipside of that circumstance was, as has been noted, the connection of whiteness to the class stratums to which they aspired. The Johnsons present several lives spent searching for spaces and interpersonal opportunities wherein whiteness could assist their ambitions, which meant that, especially in the cases of Noble and George, they sought circumstances or dynamics which did not disqualify them from opportunity as a result of their blackness. Geographic mobility was one strategy utilized by the Johnson men as they moved about the country rummaging for chances to build better lives.

As the details recounted in this chapter illustrate, the Johnsons also utilized other strategies to combat and, in some instances, set back the cramping limitations of blackness within an overarching power structure that so often tended to privilege an anti-black

[138] Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 20.

whiteness. Much of their movements were undertaken in order to locate or further interpersonal relationships with individuals who had access to opportunities or represented a chance for improvement in an of themselves, as was the case of the rich white men whom Perry hunted for when plying his mastery of horses. The Johnsons attempted to establish as the basis for these relations shared cultural values, like the middle class mores to which they adhered, or the practical value of their labor, including their various business ventures and the profits they produced or promised. Attempts to find individuals who might enter into relations with them based on concepts of a shared humanity were also undertaken, as in the case of the film director whom Noble hoped would provide professional guidance as byproduct of his apparent lack of race prejudice. Obscuring or altogether eliding their blackness was also an approach to creating or finding opportunity as Virgel's passing and George's experiences in the Indian Territories demonstrated. Even when the strategy was to try and expand the footprint of all-black areas of growing towns, the George infused the content of his newspaper with the rhetoric of uplift and its efforts to create a new range of black practices and public images, yet another strategy aimed at breaking down the barriers between the whiteness of opportunity writ large and the blackness of truncated options.

At the lead of the Johnsons' lives was business, entrepreneurial efforts aimed at creating a better material life for themselves. Business was also a method of building and engaging relationships with others, black and white, the lingua franca of their vision of uplift and improvement. George, when discussing the family's cautious protection of Virgel's racial background, noted that Virgel's businesses could be fatally undermined by

the revelation of his connections to blackness, and such was treated as almost as great a concern as the possibility of Virgel losing his life due to being outed as black. Still, it is worth noting that, just before considering that Virgel could have been killed for his deceptions, George also suggested that, there had reached a point in Virgel's life in Arkansas wherein his interpersonal connections, business ties, and wealth might have rendered him unassailable by individuals trying to undermine him by showing him to be black. George noted

> they couldn't have hurt him, anyway, because he was too strong there. If that had happened at the start that might have caused him a lot of trouble, but he had been too identified—he had big dray teams, lots of horses and lots of Caterpillars, and things to do great big work.[139]

For George, it seems, the power of being connected to successful businesses and the relationships that came from those endeavors, along with the material accumulations and the wherewithal to produce 'great big work' created an identity that could not be easily shaken by blackness, or at least allegations of blackness. The demonstrated entrenchment in the ways and values of the dominant culture was thought of as inoculating Virgel against the worst repercussions of race, and it is that power in business within the realms of human relations, along with the benefits of material well-being, that give us insight into the import of business for the Johnsons and other African Americans at the turn of the 20th century. Chapter Two will look more closely at black business during that epoch and how the Noble and George went about their most effecting business venture, the Lincoln Motion Picture Company.

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[139] Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 258

Conclusions

This chapter has provided insight into the family experiences of the men of the Johnson family and their ideas about business, interacting with white money, racial ambiguity as a way to create space for relations based on shared interests and recognition of ability and ambition. The Johnsons came from a background which provided a high level of comfort with white, middle class mores and norms and a low tolerance for having their connections to whiteness, or their humanity, disregarded in favor of the nation's dominant racial practices. While, after moving from Colorado, they lived among blacks and entered into business endeavors with blacks, they did not stop seeking the benefits of interactions with whites.

The Johnson search for an optimal American experience took them outside the much more heavily trafficked North-South axis and the role of Mobility in finding a new American experience helps us see how some blacks struggled to give their fullest sense of self room to operate, room to engage in relationships with others that had like-minded ideas and business interests. In that way the chapter provides insight into the way that a race-based identity may be insufficient to adequately house the sense of self had by a person of color or their ambitions for the types of relationships that offer material betterment. Finally, the chapter provides needed clarity on the ways that the Johnsons conceived of America as a nation dedicated to certain egalitarian ideals and notions of independence. The freedom to move about, to associate with whomever they wished, and to engage in those activities deemed suitable for the care of self were pursued with vigor and led them in the direction of nationally-oriented endeavors.

At the same time, the search for spaces of greater opportunity for inclusion and participation, for partnership can be seen as a guide to understanding the oddity of race in America and its subtle, far-reaching effects on the lives the nation's citizenry have amongst themselves. Eileen Barrett, taking from Andrew Trlin, has recounted that there is a not-necessarily linear process by which two different peoples or cultures sharing a political space can work up to *accommodation*, the tolerance of one another needed to live together.[140] Barrett was thinking of immigrant and host populations, but it is useful to think about the experience blacks have had in America by parsing her ideas on the problem of belonging and fitting in as a minority, less-empowered people. Accommodation was noted as being most often followed by *acculturation* and *economic absorption*, which meant that the dominant society's cultural habits such as dress and language are taken up by the less-powerful group as they create ways to participate in the economic life of that nation. Time then allows *integration*, which finds both groups appreciating the products and culture of the other, and, after 'intermarriage and the consequent blending of ethnic characteristics in the next (and succeeding) generations – there comes *amalgamation*.'[141]

Barrett's treatment of subaltern incorporation into the broader society demonstrates that the evolution of 'fitting in and prospering' is accomplished along circuits wherein skills and abilities help the transformation of two into one. The first chapter demonstrates that, though the experience of blacks in America cannot be seen as closely paralleling that

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[140] Eileen Barrett, 'Huguenot integration in late 17th- and 18th-Century London: Insights from Records of the French Church and Some Relief Agencies,' Randolph Vigne and Charles Littleton, (eds.), *From Strangers to Citizens: The Integration of Immigrant Communities in Britain, Ireland and Colonial America, 1550-1750* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2001), p. 375.
[141] Ibid.

of true immigrant populations not forced to constantly deal with race as a factor mitigating absorption, the importance of the perceptions and understandings of the dominant society remains a dynamic that is to some degree susceptible to amendment by way of proximity, familiarity, and demonstrated abilities to engage shared values.

Obviously, race complicated the Johnsons' experience with finding place as, in the case of Noble and George, even amalgamation could not promise a solid footing where accommodation was concerned. No stage in the integration procession was at all guaranteed to hold. The migratory habits of the Johnson clan were in many ways about managing the volatility of trying to rationalize their experiences with a desired progression toward integration.

Chapter 2

Black Prometheus: Bringing the Filmic Light of Uplift Back From the Frontier and the Business of Creating a Black Sub-Nation.

The Progressive Era, generally considered to have spanned 1890-1920, marked a period that found African Americans fighting to maintain the optimism and expanded engagements with citizenship that arose with emancipation and Reconstruction. The 1877 recall of federal troops from the South marked the nation's essential capitulation to the bloom of a new chapter of white supremacy which, through disfranchisement, Jim Crow laws, and associated de facto protocols, profoundly impinged the political rights of southern blacks while at the same time working to recapture negro labor.[142] While circumstances outside the South were not as restricted and dire as they were in the heart of Dixie, the drift away from a concerted, government-aided inculcation of the black populace into greater America was supported throughout the country by attitudes of indifference or open malice for the black condition and reached its most enduring form in

[142] For more on the end of Reconstruction see C. Vann Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); for a look at the end of Reconstruction and various class- and race-based developments that followed see Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865-1901* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001).

the Supreme Court's 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision which established the 'separate but equal' standard that would underwrite segregation and the *unequal* treatment of blacks for nearly six decades thereafter.[143] Relative to the experiences of whites, work was harder to find and keep for blacks, wages were lower, educational opportunities more evasive, living conditions on the whole more degraded, and extra-legal violence perpetrated against blacks was regular, especially in the South.[144]

One of the effects of segregation and the enforcement of an alternate socio-economic universe was the creation of a captured consumer group that provided a market in which black business could grow. Juliet E.K. Walker has termed the period spanning 1900-1930 'the golden age of black business,' one wherein black businesses took up the mantle of commerce in an array of fields that spanned banking, insurance, real estate, construction, and more personal services such as funeral homes or beautician shops.[145] In many instances these were business opportunities that arose from both the familiarity black entrepreneurs had with the needs of their community, sometimes on a race-wide basis, and the refusal of white companies to note or address those needs. For instance, Walker noted that Anthony Overton, a successful black entrepreneur in the beauty products field, the most celebrated of black industries from the early-20th Century, was able to get a foothold in the face powder game with $1,960 in capital because 'white cosmetic

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[143] *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).
[144] For a look into the deleterious effects of the post-Reconstruction Era on black life in the United States see Rayford Logan *The Betrayal of the Negro from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York: De Capo, 1997).
[145] Juliet E.K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship*, New York, N.Y., Twayne Publishers, 1998, pp. 182-224.

companies completely ignored the market.'[146] As black business districts coalesced in various parts of the country the concept of a black economic nationalism began to gain strength and leaders of the race such as W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington championed black commercial undertakings as an important part of the fight for improvement in the lot of the nation's black populace.[147]

The movement toward black patronage of black businesses was not just about providing for black needs where whites businesses would not provide goods and services or hire and treat African America consumers with dignity. There was also a desire to have a dialogue with white commercial power wherein competition which removed black dollars from white coffers would force whites to listen more intently to the overall wants of the black consumer experience, a set of goals which aimed to open up and equalize consumer spaces. A *Half-Century Magazine* article sums this nuanced position up well in stating

> Let the colored men and women go into business; into every kind of business that is necessary to supply the wants of the people; let their places of business be so attractive that they will induce men and women of all races to trade with them; then let the colored people show them preference in their patronage.[148]

It is worth noting that the call was for the creation of black businesses which could be seen as objectively attractive, even repositories of universal ideas of cleanliness and propriety that would attract all races. This was not a hermetic exercise but instead was meant to

[146] Ibid., 210.
[147] Walker, *History of Black Business in America*, 183.
[148] Kathryn M. Johnson, 'Observations About the Need of Business Enterprise Among Colored People,' *The Half-Century Magazine*, December 1916, p. 8.

send various messages of worthiness, belonging, and invitations for interaction across racial bounds.

The view that a business movement serving the black community could span a national circuitry was enhanced by the kind of exploratory travels undertaken by the Johnson family. The first chapter followed the Johnson men as they moved about the nation with nomadic energy almost exclusively in pursuit of opportunities for material gain in areas of robust economic growth that could support thriving black communities, populations of wealthy whites who had need of the types of expertise that the father and sons might provide, and environments wherein their capabilities and willingness to provide services were less likely to be overshadowed by white considerations of their blackness. These explorative journeys aimed to find, and even create, an America in which blackness could build belonging and partnership. Consider a pamphlet put out by Plummer Bernard Young's *Norfolk Journal and Guide*. Entitled 'A Four Million-Dollar Field' and emblazoned with a dollar sign, the prospectus sought to attract advertisers by educating them regarding the demographics and annual black spending power of Virginia and North Carolina, including detailed information about the increasing cash and landed holdings of middle class blacks and 'thrifty colored farmers' in the bi-state area. [149] The pamphlet opened with a paragraph that likened the untapped well of negro consumption in the South to 'vast fields of diamonds' that, prior to the arrival of whites, natives in Africa had tread upon for centuries without seeing their value.[150] Undertaking business was posited as a way to draw value and wealth from black communities for blacks while at the

[149] 'A Four Million-Dollar Field,' George P. Johnson Negro Film Collection.
[150] Ibid.

same time taking hold of a rightful place in an American panorama so indebted to commerce. This is a vision of both assimilation, in that blacks were being called upon to recognize opportunity as it existed in an overall system of values that was not entirely of their making, and a demand that ownership be taken over the material wealth that existed in the black world of the United States. Blackness and the business of the Negro community was referred to as native to the United States and at the same time African, even global and diasporic in nature.

This chapter seeks to look more closely at Noble and George's primary business project, the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, so as to gain some insight into the rise of black business endeavors in the early 20th Century. This inquiry adds to the scholarship of black business by making explicit how undertaking business spoke to the African-American struggle to find place and partnership in America, how business sought to create new and expanding ranges of black and American identity, and the place business played in bringing about an understanding of a black and American nation that could provide a base from which a measure of material security could be had. Implicit in this set of observations are notes that can be taken on the marriage between profits, belonging, and uplift.

Noble Johnson, the Black Image in Early Film, and the Birth of Black Cinema

By 1915 Noble Johnson's readiness to relocate to new opportunities had led him to leave Philadelphia in favor of Hollywood, the burgeoning center of the film production world. Many of his cohorts from the Lubin team made the same pilgrimage and Noble had

experienced no appreciable difficulty in getting roles.[151] Noble played various parts during his first days in Hollywood but, as would be the case for most of his career, few would involve him depicting a Negro. Instead, he was cast primarily as a Mexican or Native American character with at least one role calling for a generic 'American.'[152] Noble's appearance -- light of skin, relatively straight of hair -- was racially ambiguous and the fact that characters of color, including black roles, had at that point often been played by white actors further obscured the question of his on-screen race or ethnicity. It was also the case that there were few roles for black actors at that point in the film industry's development. Such was the case in spite of the fact that representations of African Americans had been part of the film medium since its incept date. In 1895 Edison's Kinetoscopes on occasion featured such images as blacks dancing or bathing and by 1898 early instances of mass audiences were exposed to films of African American soldiers engaged in various military duties.[153] A 1904 piece by Edison entitled *Ten Pickaninnies*, which depicted a number of black youths rollicking about while being referred to as 'inky kids' or 'cute ebonies' demonstrated the dismissiveness blacks often faced and a 1909 one-penny viewing made titillation of the Texas lynching of a black man.[154]

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[151] For notes regarding the Lubin crew making their way to Hollywood see Delbert E. Davenport, 'On the Same Trail,' Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[152] George Johnson, 'Noble Johnson,' Microfilm, GPJ Collection. This information regarding Noble's early roles appears in numerous of George's notes.
[153] For reference to the Edison Kinestoscopes see Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977 (1993)), p.12; for references to the black troops see 'The Colored Troops Disembarking' and 'The Ninth Negro Calvary Watering Horses.' Jesse Rhines, *Black Film/White Money* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996) 14.
[154] Rhines, *Black Film/White Money*, 14, describes the Edison short; Charlene Regester, 'The African-American Press and Race Movies, 1909-1929,' Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and

The absence of black bodies on the screen was experienced by blacks as an affront to both a history and a present wherein blacks were part of the forward march of civilization. For instance, Curtis Taylor, a Negro attorney, wrote Cecil DeMille about the failure of the director's *The Ten Commandments* to depict Simon of Cyrene, the man who carried Christ's cross the final distance to the mount, as a black man – one location bearing the name Cyrene having been in Libya.[155] Taylor stated that

> In fact, the world would be poor indeed if the achievements of the black man in literature and the finer things of life were taken away from it.[156]

Regardless of the historical accuracy of Taylor's claim regarding the racial make up of Simon, it is clear that there was in the black community a concern about being elided from the imagination of the movie-going populace, and that many Negroes felt that members of their race were worthy of the notice of members of other races in ways which spoke positively of black potential overall. Taylor fully appreciated that the cultural products of the black community were important in the battle for an acknowledgment of all that the race had to offer

Black leaders called upon entrepreneurs of the race to both address the exhibition of negative images in the theaters they owned or managed and to begin to produce movies

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Charles Musser, eds., *Oscar Micheaux & His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001) 34-35.

[155] George P. Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' Oral History Program of University of California at Los Angeles (Los Angeles, California: The Regents of the University of California, 1970) p. 68.

[156] Ibid. DeMille, for his part, responded with appreciation for Taylor's note and calmly assessed that 'I cannot find any foundation for this statement' and assured that 'Had I had sufficient historical foundation, I would have been very happy to have had the character of Simon played by a black man.'.

with a more positive vision of black lives. Anna Everett notes in *Returning the Gaze*, her study of black film criticism from the Progressive Era, that Lester Walton, the editor of the entertainment section of the *New York Age*, a negro newspaper with national circulation, headed up these calls to action. In 1913 he noted that 'the motion picture industry can wield an influence for good and serve as an educational medium in helping to solve the so-called Negro question' and he followed that volley with 1914 comments regarding debasing on-screen depictions of blackness wherein he expressed the 'Severest Criticism' for 'the colored people…who are not progressive enough to take advantage of the wonderful opportunities offered to make money in the amusement world.'[157]

The first black-owned film company producing narrative titles, in this case comedies, was Chicago's Foster Photoplay Company, which may have had its beginnings as early as 1910 but was not incorporated until 1912. The head of the company, William Foster, who also wrote for *The Chicago Defender* under the name of Juli Jones, had a history in film that reached back to unknown dates with another Chicago concern, S & A Films.[158] Foster produced several comedies and had plans for other types of films that included drama and some fantasy with *Fool and Fire*, a 'vampire drama.'[159] Foster appears to have been the first Negro film producer to break down the film industry as a field of financial opportunity for blacks. The seasoned showman noted that, though there were millions of African Americans who visited movie houses on a regular basis, often more than once a week, and that it was therefore clear that blacks collectively spent millions of dollars

[157] Anna Everett, Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949 (London: Duke University Press, 2001), 31, 32.
[158] Notes on The Foster Photoplay Company, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[159] Notes on The Foster Photoplay Company, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

annually on viewing films, blacks were taking a paltry $200,000 out of what was overall a huge industry generating hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue.[160] Foster believed that balancing that disparity could mean big profits for a race business that produced motion pictures and he believed that, though there were few black-owned movie houses, white owners would find that their black patronage would pay as much as 50% more to see movies that presented black bodies on the screen.[161] Foster insisted that the race was ready to provide for itself what white-owned companies would not, stating in a prospectus

> We have plenty of real, honest trained young men and women to handle any business, no matter how big; we have more talent in the race according to our percentage than any race – why should we stand back?[162]

This call to arms by the Negro Leadership of the Progressive Era would soon be turned to a most urgent battle. The advent of editing, which allowed the action to cut from one 'scene' to the next, gave rise to narrative films and, as films increased in length and storytelling became more complex, blacks were less and less found on screen save in the most trivial or demeaning of roles.[163] This was the state of African Americans in film as 1915, the 50-year anniversary of the Civil War, brought with it D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*.[164] Black spectatorship of early cinema and its reflection on the black public image was jolted by the arrival and subsequent notoriety of the film, a picture of epic proportions

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[160] William Foster, 'Cold Facts and Figures Why the Race Should Willingly Support Financially Colored Moving Picture Producing Company,' Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[161] Ibid.
[162] William Foster, 'Taking Pictures,' from the Foster Photo Play Company's prospectus, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[163] Ibid., 13.
[164] Ibid., 41.

which centered on the rise of a new Southern culture intent on defeating Reconstruction. *Birth of a Nation* was, and continues to be, widely hailed as a masterpiece of cinematic wizardry that established various narrative and technical marks which moved the medium into its next phase of development and the industry into the realm of commercially viable art. The film was also, and has ever since been, broadly reviled for dwelling pruriently on depictions of race in a way that forwarded the belief that, because mulattoes were hopelessly corrupted and blacks were pathologically unable to govern themselves socially, politically, or sexually, white supremacist violence was the most appropriate method for protecting the sanctity of American civilization.[165] A blizzard of condemnation followed along with a well-publicized effort on the part of black leadership to censor those portions of the film that were most offensive to blacks, especially the film's emotionally charged scenes of a black male character attempting to rape one of the white female leads and the Ku Klux Klan's para-militaristic response.[166]

Birth of a Nation is also often spoken of as having been one of the early catalysts for race cinema as African Americans came to the conclusion that trying to keep the film, or its most unsettling racial imagery, out of cinemas was not a sufficient response. Rather, some movers in the Negro populace decided that the best reaction was to finally begin businesses dedicated to putting on the screen black-made movies depicting images of

[165] The story behind *The Birth of a Nation*, it's mixture of revolutionary technical mastery and virulent anti-black racism is well known and ubiquitous. See, for example, Robert Lang, *The Birth of a Nation: D.W. Griffith, Director* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

[166] The story of the black effort to suppress the most racially controversial scenes is also fairly well known. See, for instance, Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: A History of 'The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

blackness that reflected the Negro's perspective.[167] The first major effort came in the form of a film entitled *The Birth of a Race*, which intended to show the rise of Negroes from origins in Africa to a productive citizenship in America but instead wasted tens of thousands of dollars before coming to theaters in late 1918 in a thrown-together mess of confusion and tedium. Film historian Thomas Cripps referred to the final outcome as a 'grotesque defeat for blacks' and George Johnson, despite acknowledging portions which were beautifully photographed at great expense, considered the entirety a 'mammoth swindle.'[168] Instead of stanching the bleed of negative stereotypes regarding black ineptitude and mendacity the film seemingly confirmed them. While the fiasco behind the *Birth of a Race*, which had the initial support of leading Negroes and hefty financing during portions of its ragged production, did not in fact prove the negative stereotypes, it did demonstrate that there were daunting technical, financial, and logistical issues connected with successful film-making that would not be tamed by a bare desire to show blackness is an acceptable light.

As the furor over *Birth of a Nation* swirled and churned, Noble had begun to branch out from acting in an attempt to make good on his ambition to get in on the formative stages of the picture business. In 1916 he took advantage of his relationship with Universal to pen a 3-reel title, *The Indian's Lament*, which was produced under the

[167] *Birth of a Nation* as a tipping point for the move toward a black cinematic response is a stock part of the race cinema story. See, for example, Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, pp. 41-89.
[168] Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, pp. 73-75; George reported that one portion of the film had cost a whopping $140,000 and was executed to great effect while others were left in shambles. The production apparently fell into disarray with the primary backers, the Frohman Amusement Company ghosting the project suddenly without any explanation being made available to the curiosities of the public. George P. Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' pp. 63, 64.

company's 'Tuesday' brand, Gold Seal Films.[169] The story dealt with a white woman trying to assist Native Americans who were dealing with a crooked Indian Agent and included scenes of exciting horsemanship which would be a staple of Noble's actor persona.[170] *The Indian's Lament* was also a first indication of the Johnsons' tendency to use their experiences and interests to create scenarios revolving around the tense intersections between race and justice as represented by fair business or real estate dealings. It appears likely that not only was Noble one of the first blacks to appear on screen, but he was also one of the first to write for Hollywood. *Lament* shows us that Noble felt comfortable taking his stories of racial conflict and justice to whites as businessmen and viewers and that he had some desire to be a part of the Hollywood industry on creative levels that included preparing productions for white stars and audiences. If we again turn to Noble's letter to George from 1914 wherein he expressed the hope that his attention to the methods of Director Romaine Fielding would lead to a place of growth in the film industry it is clear that such encompassed an intention to make films for audiences that included whites and blacks. During the first years of Noble's involvement with filmmaking he appears to have considered it a realm wherein race could be obscured on screen and wherein business relations could put racial difference aside. Further, during that early Hollywood period, it appears that Noble had reason to hold such beliefs.

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[169] Anthony Slide, *Early American Cinema, Rev. Edition*, United States, Anthony Slide (self published) 1994, p.55. Universal had a brand name production company for each day of the week as part of its early organizational strategy.
[170] *Indian's Lament*, Internet Movie Database, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0312809/; *Atlanta Constitution*, 3/2/1917, p.14.

One of Noble's associates on the Universal lot was Harry Gant, a white man with his own cowboy background that had led him to a friendship with Noble in Colorado. Gant had made a voyage to Hollywood completely separate from Noble's and was a respected cameraman and cinematographer known for his ability to get shots with high efficiency.[171] When Noble showed up on Universal's lot to begin his West Coast career one of the first people he came across was Gant. Each informed the other that they had landed in movies when a film crew had tapped them for riding work. Gant ran out of horseback duties and started in on the camera while Noble 'got to flirting with the crepe-hair and juggling the grease paint and soon had them fooled.'[172] The two former cowpokes came upon the idea of continuing with Noble's desires to expand his footprint in the business by starting a Negro-owned film company producing serious narrative films focusing on Negro characters to be sold to Negro audiences. These would be films that were unmarred by the denigrating stereotypes that dominated the comedies that most filmic representations of blacks presented at that time. Instead the pictures would depict blacks as upwardly striving individuals working through moral dilemmas and attaining middle class lives based on thrift, grit, and hard, self-reliant work. The movies would be some of the first entries into the category of motion picture known as *race films*. No other contemporary company had taken that tact and, while the record does not make it clear that responding to Griffith's highly successful film was a priority, it is hard to imagine that this plan of

[171] 'Two Important Factors in the Production of Universal's Greatest Serial "The Bull's Eye,"' GPJ Collection.
[172] Ibid.

action was not at least in part spurred by the explosion of interest regarding the black public image that followed in the wake of *Birth of a Nation*.

A Business Response to Unjust Imagery: The Lincoln Motion Picture Company is Born

Noble Johnson and Harry Gant put together a group of leading Los Angeles race men whose connections with business or the film industry were notable and thereby started the first black-owned film venture which was dedicated to making dramas featuring blacks for black audiences. Borrowing a name of nationwide significance for Negro aspirations in America, the Lincoln Motion Picture Company was founded in May of 1916 with a capitalization of $75,000. Noble Johnson was the President, Dr. J. Thomas Smith, a well-known Los Angels area druggist who owned two pharmacies in Negro neighborhoods, was Vice President and Treasurer. A young, local actor, Clarence Brooks, acted as Secretary and his brother, Dudley Brooks, was his assistant. The company's attorney was the high profile Harvard Law graduate Willie O. Tyler, a veteran of the Spanish-American War and prominent in the Los Angeles Negro community.[173] Gant, the lone white face in the group and a vocal stockholder, was nonetheless something of a 'silent partner' as his name did not appear on most of the company's early letterhead. Apparently, the value of presenting a Negro-owned and –operated business dedicated to producing Negro films was best left un-muddied by having a white man as an officer. In addition to an unimposing amount of

[173] The Lincoln officers are listed in the notes on the company kept by George Johnson, Microfilm, GPJ Collection; In re Willie O. Tyler, See 'Walter Gordon Remembers,' *Los Angeles County Bar Association Guide for Senior Lawyers*, http://www.lacba.org/showpage.cfm?pageid=9952

start-up cash the company initially possessed human capital that lacked experience and know-how. The only member of the founding group with any extensive business savvy was Smith, but he had schooled in the southern educational system of which George was so suspicious.[174] Noble had not finished high school but did command some knowledge of life, hard work, and the picture industry. Gant was similarly situated after having stumbled into the business. None of the other principals had experience with film outside of some stints as extras.[175] There would have to be a considerable learning curve if the valuable assets they did have were to lead to success.

Noble, a man of chiseled good looks and large frame, was the natural choice for the featured male roles and Gant took over camera work and direction. The company quickly cranked out two titles in a couple of months, *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition*, a Horatio Alger-type story of black advancement via hard work and expertise, and *The Trooper of Troop K*, a story of Negro bravery during a battle with Mexican troops based on the real-life events of the Battle of Carrizal.[176] We will discuss the narrative content and meaning of these films in Chapter 4. For now it is enough to note that these first titles were shown about the Los Angeles area at ten cents a head and did well enough that Noble and Gant had reason to believe that their product could perform profitably on a national scale.

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[174] Letter from George Johnson, 10/3/1967, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[175] Ibid.
[176] Synopsis of *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition* and Synopsis of *The Trooper of Troop K*, Microfilm, GPJ Collection; For an overview of the 6/16/1916 Battle of Carrizal, a skirmish between the soldiers of the all-black Troop K of the 10th cavalry on reconnaissance over the Mexican border in search of Pancho Villa and his men who instead ended up in firefight with Carrancista Soldiers, See John M. Carroll, *The Black Military Experience in the American West* (New York: Liverwright Publishing Co., 1971), pp. 499-502.

Pre-production on a third title was undertaken and the focus shifted to the question of finding theaters across the country and organizing a profitable, national distribution plan. The initial cash influx had come from the original officers at about $500 each and some stock sales were added.[177] The Lincoln Motion Picture Company was incorporated on January 20, 1917. The company's $15,623.68 in assets were appraised by a trio of white men which included Henry McRae, the Manager of Productions of Universal Films, and one of that studio's stars, Harry Carey, Sr., which demonstrates that the company was born with known and purposeful connections to Hollywood, especially Universal Studios, and that all parties had reason to know such was the case.[178]

Realization and *Trooper* played at Tuskegee's Institute Chapel, a booking that followed not long after a speech had been delivered in that venerable space by R.R. Moton, the Institute's principal, regarding the bravery and sacrifice of the men of the 10th during the Carrizal fracas.[179] An account of the Tuskegee exhibition noted the educational, even propagandistic capabilities of the Lincoln titles when stating that 'such pictures as these are not only elevating and inspiring in themselves, but they are also calculated to instill principles of race pride and loyalty in the minds of colored people.'[180] The ability of film to not only reproduce but to transport the audience by signaling the experience of *being there* led that recap to describe the viewing with words that conflated watching *The Trooper of Troop K* with having 'witnessed the bravery of the Negro troopers' themselves, a spectacle which caused in the audience a 'quickening of their patriotism and their love of

[177] George P. Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 148.
[178] Letter from Noble Johnson to the officers of the LMPC, undated, GPJ Collection.
[179] 'Lincoln Motion Picture Company Making Good,' George P. Johnson Film Collection.
[180] Ibid.

race.'[181] *Trooper* was an occasion to enjoy the melding of positive feelings about being black, the accomplishments of blacks in America, and being American. The use of the term 'witness' indicates that the Lincoln films were absorbed as a kind of proof regarding the past, present, and future of the race, a demonstration of an aspect of reality that had been under question but could no longer be doubted after having been seen by groups who saw others seeing the same representation of events. For a population that had long yearned for recognition of their worth and value as humans and citizens, seeing black probity and heroism played out in a manner so fully detailed and capable of supporting an immersion into an externalized rendition of a shared dream, a dream held by all, had to be powerfully affirming.

The Black Theater-Going Experience

Theaters of varying sizes across the country that catered to mixed or Negro patronage existed or were opening across the nation. There was a contest ongoing regarding whether or not African Americans would have access to clean, comfortable environs within which to enjoy their entertainments or whether they would perpetually be required to haunt overheated balconies accessed via back entryways that communicated the distaste for blackness for which the dominant society habitually made room. Charlene Regester has noted that the black ownership of Southern theaters that arose here and there during those onset years of cinema were a source of pride and relief from the persistent, aggressive segregationist seating arrangements of North Carolina's Jim Crow theaters,

[181] 'Lincoln Motion Pictures at Institute Chapel,' George P. Johnson Film Collection.

uncomfortable relegations that required blacks to get to huddle upstairs in balcony areas known as the 'buzzard's roost.'[182]

The theaters that were run by and would cater to Negroes usually provided better accommodations than the 'buzzard's roost' but were sometimes undercut by white-owned theaters doing a mixed business who could therefore afford to ask five cents a head rather than ten cents, a discount that led some black patrons to forego seeing films in the black-owned spaces in favor of the cheaper showings. The response of editorial tastemakers from the black press could be harsh and unaccepting of such failures to support the race's business-led battle for upgraded public experiences. The Gem theater in Lexington, Kentucky was forced to lower their prices to five cents a head in order compete, but made sure to make the price change a national announcement in *The Chicago Defender* whose article on the incident included the scolding question 'Who is it that would not give five cents difference for equal accommodations?'[183] The piece, which was clearly meant to shame any blacks across the country who would value a nickel more than the support of black businesses seeking to provide alternatives to the degradations of segregation, went on to express horror at the claims that some of the traitorous pikers threw their masculine duties to the wind by taking their female companions through such ignominious portals.

Though segregation was not supported by law in northern areas, there could still be strong *defacto* practices which were aimed at either segregating black customers or

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[182] Charlene Regester, 'From the Buzzard's Roost: Black Movie-Going in Durham and other North Carolina Cities during the Early Period of American Cinema,' *Film History*, Vol. 17, 2005, pp.113-124.
[183] Hardin Tolbert, 'Lexington Discusses Jim Crowism,' *The Chicago Defender*, 1/1/1916, p.4.

making them feel unwanted, such as arbitrary requests for relocation at the behest of white patrons.[184] As a result, there was still a great deal of reason to be critical of black theater going experiences in integrated houses and much in the way of a sense of validation and self-determination in attending shows at black houses, especially those owned by blacks. An article in *The Chicago Whip*, the outspoken and somewhat radical Negro newspaper, often struck out at subpar theater spaces and at one point carried their indignation to the extreme of comparing the odiferous and filthy Monogram Theater's practice of charging the same prices as those found at nicer theaters servicing whites to the service's of 'slavery-time,' an equation that intimated that bondage and a lack of proper entertainment choices were more closely related than one might think.[185] *The Whip* also demanded a Negro-owned theater on the South side where the city's blacks took their entertainment but were later forced to be satisfied that the States Theater, owned by a Jewish man, Nathan Joseph, had made expenditures on a state of the art projector and an improved screen that communicated and awareness and care of his colored patrons.[186]

As film established itself and the bigger, Hollywood production companies moved to verticalize their holdings, large, often inventively ornate theaters cropped up, and Negro theaters soon followed suit as the leisure dollars being spent by African Americans were more and more seen to be an important source of revenue in the Amusement industry.

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[184] Mary Carbine, '"The Finest Outside the Loop": Motion Picture Exhibitions in Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1905-1928,' *Camera Obscura*, Volume 8, No. 2 23, 1990, p. 19.
[185] 'Under the Lash of the Whip,' *The Chicago Whip*, 6/26/1920, p. 2.
[186] The demand for the black-owned theater in the Stroll can be found in 'Let's Get a Colored Movie House on the South Side,' *The Chicago Whip*, 10/11/1919, and the piece about the improvements at the theater can be found in 'Install Costly Picture Device at States,' *The Chicago Whip*, 11/12/1921.

Theaters like Chicago's Metropolitan, formerly a theater for whites but, by 1920, a theater catering 90% Negro audiences with 1,500 seats which were priced at 35 cents each, began to come on line.[187] A 14 piece orchestra, two stage turns, one white and one black, and a weekly novelty act provided constant entertainment and thereby established that there was a need for more and more black-oriented entertainment products. It was into that growing void that the George Johnson and the Lincoln Motion Picture Company's distribution scheme would blindly step. George recognized the race's taste for seeing themselves on screen meant that a market existed which might support all facets of a film industry owned, operated, and populated by members of the race. He wrote in one Lincoln pamphlet:

> Has it not been proven that the colored people prefer to see themselves portrayed upon the screen in a dignified manner by competent artists, in preference to a picture of the opposite race? Has it not been proven by one Race firm that the colored people can produce, can market and will attend first class photoplays of their own production? Why then should not the colored people and their friends control, thru organized effort, the source (Manufacturing and Producing Companies); the distributing (Releasing Agencies, Branch Offices, etc.) and the exhibiting (Theatres, Road Shows, etc.) of this Inter-national form of amusement?[188]

George envisioned a black film industry erected as much as was possible in a manner similar to that of the Hollywood model which was to be built upon the reliability of the black consumer's preference for a view of black bodies on the screen, tastefully depicted, and a hope that blacks would see value in and patronize the business efforts of the race.

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[187] 'Presentation Craze Hits Colored Theaters, 1920-1923' Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[188] 'Million Dollar Film Organization,' Microfilm GPJ Collection.

The African American population was coming to be conceived of as a subnational market that could support an industry with international possibilities. It is interesting to note that 'friends' of the race were considered an important part of the formula. This was a reference to whites with money who were willing to properly invest in black productions and a nod to the idea that establishing successful black businesses was tied to managing relationships that maintained conduits to white money and knowhow. As distribution is the center of the profit-bearing mechanism in the film industry, and as such was also the clearest machination of the LMPC's involvement with creating a national business circuit and any sense of national identity Negroes would build therefrom, it behooves us to look closely at the details of the distribution operation the company set up.

The Problem and Solve of Distribution

In the early years of cinema the distribution of films made by sundry production companies occurred by the 'states rights' or 'road show' methods.[189] The states rights approach involved production companies selling prints to salesmen who would have the right to extract profit from the film by dealing with exhibition houses in a designated area, usually a region comprised of several states.[190] The states rights salesman and the theaters had most of the power and collected most of the money from that distribution method. The road show meant the production company would deal directly with the exhibition house for special event screenings that would allow inflated prices, though this method was hard to sustain after a relatively brief debut period and only worked with a schedule

[189] J.A. Aberdeen, *Hollywood Renegades: The Society of Independent Motion Picture Producers* (Palos Verdes Estates, California: Cobblestone Entertainment, 2000), pp. 29, 30.
[190] Ibid.

that allowed a limited number of viewings, though the road show did remove a middleman for producers. [191]

In 1911 William Wadsworth Hodkinson introduced a different method of distribution whereby distribution companies would provide the producers, who were virtually all independent concerns at that point, with an advance of money that would allow them to make pictures. The exclusive rights to these films were turned over to the distributor. The pictures would then be sent out through film exchanges controlled by the distributor who also handled marketing.[192] The split was 35/65 in favor of the producer, who received steady operational financing, but the distributor got a continuous flow of pictures and leverage with the exhibition houses.[193] This system remained in place for decades and was key to stabilizing the film industry. However this distribution system did not exist for the black-owned companies that arose during the early years of cinema, as the exchanges would not take Negro pictures, especially if they were not filled with the demeaning imagery of blacks that were so popular at the time.[194] The job of setting up the distribution scheme was handed off to Noble's brother, George, who was still residing in Omaha, Nebraska, and working as a mail clerk in that city's post office. He would attend to the company business during the day and then work his clerking position with the Post Office from 3:30 p.m. until Midnight. It was a monumental undertaking for which George initially received minimal spot payments before demanding and receiving a full, equal interest in the company.

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[191] Ibid.
[192] Ibid., 31, 32.
[193] Ibid.
[194] George P. Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 132.

George's penchant for detailed work would be indispensible to the project of building a national business, as would be his *Tulsa Guide* experience with printing, advertising on a trans-regional basis, and, perhaps most importantly, seeking support on either side of the color line. George would work tirelessly struggling to establish a Negro distribution system for the LMPC that would dialogue with blacks in all sectors of the country. In other words, the LMPC sought to reach a national Negro population that was assumed to have a shared racial identity to which the company's productions would speak and upon which a circuitry of business relations and practices could be built. The first showings outside of California were, not surprisingly, in Omaha in 1916, not long after the first films were produced. George was brought on in part because he was advantageously located in a central area of the nation and could relay information, ad matter, and film prints in every direction with minimal differences in time.[195] Without access to distribution through the well-connected exchanges, some type of system approximating states rights or road shows would have to be put into place. George first contacted Tony Langston, the primary theater critic for *The Chicago Defender*, the nation's most far-reaching Negro weekly, and, after viewing the first two films, Langston agreed to represent the LMPC in the Midwest.

Prior to writing for *the Defender* Langston had been part of a successful Vaudevillian duo and he had years of sweat equity built up in the Midwest's theater web.[196] Langston the critic was known as a 'salve artist' as he tended to shower superlatives onto his subjects regardless of the actual quality of their work. All of the artists in his suzerainty were thereby contented in their dealings with him and all the theaters were assured that

[195] George Johnson, 'My Activities in Negro Motion Pictures,' Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[196] Letter from Tony Langston to George Johnson, 2/8/1917, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

he was assisting in gathering them an audience. His rapport with the denizens of the Chicago theater scene was such that he was rumored to have once talked a performer into rejoining an act he had just quit so that the review of a yet-to-occur show that Langston had already written and set for copy would not embarrass the jolly glad-hander. Langston's warm touch made him an extremely successful critic who supposedly was able to at times earn more than the editors-in-chief for whom he worked.[197] It is not at all clear, however, the degree to which his writings and activities represented the tastes and feelings of his readers, or the non-reading public, for that matter.

Langston the showman was on occasion required to go out on the road with Lincoln films, sometimes for three days at a time, and he could end up in places far removed from his home court, like Richmond, Virginia, where he had to muddle through with no connections whatsoever. But most of the time he was squarely settled in the Chicago area and in that milieu he was a great asset to the LMPC, especially during those early months of feeling out the scheme. Langston utilized his considerable clout in and around the Chicago to get Lincoln titles into prime houses for top quality runs on the Stroll, Chicago's famed black entertainment and arts district. Robert Abbott, *The Defender's* owner, gave him considerable leeway that was directly tied to the LMPC's status as the leading provider of clean, uplifting race films. In a letter dated March 31, 1917, Langston expressed his excitement for the coming of the third Lincoln title, *The Law of Nature*, and noted that he had kept a comedy out of the theaters a couple of weeks earlier, 'comedy' working as a euphemism for a film that created humor at the expense of blacks while

[197] 'When Everybody Was Great,' *The Afro-American*, January 16, 1937, p.10.

eschewing uplifting content.[198] Langston admitted he was anxious to get the new Lincoln picture onto the Black Belt's screens before any other competitors were able to bring their newest products to market. Abbot had told him that he wanted 'any proposition touching on pictures' to cross Langston's path on behalf of the paper and that the critic then had the length of leash to 'handle it in any way desirable' as the newspaper would 'stand by almost anything that I want to pull.' With that as context, Langston's barely muted braggadocio assured George that he could be counted on to 'always use my drag to keep the field clear' in Chicago. Langston was not just loud talking. He was known to use his influence to push the titles of some company's off of the Stroll's screens. Langston found the product coming from Chicago's Ebony Film Corporation to be of poor quality and demeaning to blacks, too steeped in burlesquing the race, so he moved to have the leading theaters catering to Chicago's blacks avoid booking Ebony films like *Aladdin Jones* or *Money Talks in Darktown*. Indeed, The Defender's overall position was one which supported 'clean' race films which forwarded an image of blackness that moved beyond the negative stereotypes of chicken-stealing, crap-shooting Negroes.[199]

By late 1916 George and Langston were working out the details of the distribution and promotion methods the company would use for the bulk of its existence. A November 24, 1916 letter from Langston suggests that he was instrumental in devising a system of satellite Lincoln offices which would receive marching orders, ad ephemera, and the

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[198] Letter from Tony Langston to George Johnson, 3/31/1917, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[199] For a look into *The Defender's* responses to degrading imagery of blacks in early cinema see Davarian Baldwin's *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2007) pp.122-154; Langston's broadsides aimed at the Ebony Film Corporation began with his critical comments in the *Chicago Defender* editions of July 1 and July 8, 1916.

necessary prints from George's office in Omaha.[200] Langston indicated he thought that members of the nation's far-flung Negro 'newspaper gang' could be enlisted to head up the satellite offices in various sectors of the country and that prints could thereby more effectively navigate the myriad locations and booking policies for theaters, lodges, and churches throughout the United States. This plan sought to avoid the vagaries of houses that were in close geographic proximity but wholly different where booking time frames were concerned. Further, because ad campaigns had to effectively precede the exhibition date, on-the-road 'wildcatting' the films on an ad hoc basis, a method that was largely out of favor by that point, was simply not going to be cost effective. The five or six prints that would be in circulation for each title, a relatively small number, would travel adjacent areas and the bookings were to be planned so that each print would be kept as active on as continuous a basis as possible.

Langston also surmised that the 'prestige' aspect of the Lincoln product and brand would be undercut by the arrival of traveling salesmen types, film in hand, trying to set up a viewing in a matter of hours. Langston explained that he learned about the need to avoid arousing suspicions via travelling salesmen with film under arm from Jewish businessmen, one of several instances wherein Johnson's correspondences include references to the knowledge of certain business practices being notably holed up in the Jewish community.[201] Knowledge can be collectively maintained and tested, thereby becoming part of the culture connected with an ethnic group in general. That said, mentioning such as a source of guidance indicates an implicit, if not explicit, acknowledgement that the

[200] Letter from Tony Langston to George Johnson, 11/23/1916, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[201] Ibid.

information or processes that were thought of as being of one ethnicity or the other could be taken up made the intellectual or strategic property of another ethnic or racial group.

The plan of utilizing newspaper men across the country was put into action and worked acceptably. This was essentially an in-house states rights scheme that modified the traditional states rights operation by controlling the percentage that the agents received. In addition to Tony Langston in Chicago, W.H King of *The St. Louis Argus* handled the St. Louis area; D. Ireland Thomas, the manager of the Lincoln Theater in Charleston, South Carolina, headed up the operations in the New Orleans sector, and would prove to be and extremely important pillar in the company's business; Ruben Black attended to the Atlantic territory; and the Eastern locations were looked after by Emory Crane and a gentleman by the last name of Wells. This constituted the first effort by a Negro organization to manage national distribution throughout the country and therefore marked an important moment in the development of a broader sense of blackness in America.[202] One theater manager, the 'only Negro operating a first class M.P. House in Chattanooga,' noted that the rise of the LMPC's booking system of black agents led him to desire dealing with only colored men in the future.[203]

A hub city was usually chosen so that several cities or towns could be reached from temporary bases of operations. Any delay was an expense that bit noticeably into tight margins. George maintained daily contact with each of these road men and was responsible for mailing out all requested ad materials such as slides, lithograph posters,

[202] 'Distribution the Most Essential Factor in Successful Production of Negro Pictures,' George P. Johnson Film Collection.
[203] Letter to George P. Johnson, 10/19/1916, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

one-sheets, and the like. He also managed an advance sales staff of two, Ira McGowan, George's brother-in-law, and Joseph LeCour, who would go on to make a name for himself in journalism on the East Coast after his days with the LMPC. The film stock of the early 1900s was for the most part a thick layer of nitrocellulose which, being primarily nitric acid and having the properties of guncotton, was unstable and given to combustion. When prints were destroyed George would order a new print while also cancelling showings in smaller venues so that the dates at larger, hub-city venues could be kept. One can glean a sense of the juggling act involved in a telegram from Wells to George noting that he had received some films from Langston and was trying to send him the reels that had been in Atlanta while setting up new shows himself and reporting the great success of a just past exhibition while lamenting the lack of contact from other sectors.[204]

George sometimes had to mail out a print of the film for a special set of showings as opposed to the road grind.[205] A proper road show extravaganza was utilized sometimes and could be lucrative if the weather cooperated. However, ad hoc showings were often undertaken for amounts far below the desired rental fee in order to fill in spaces on the calendar that were spent in the interstitial burgs and towns between definite big city dates. If Oklahoma City didn't take the film, Muskogee would be tapped as the hub city so that Muskogee and Tulsa could be reached. Many of the theaters that catered to black entertainment appetites were not in urban centers and therefore could not easily afford the daily rental fees. A system was put in place whereby a runner with a print of the film

[204] July 9, 1917 telegram from Philadelphia, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[205] Tony Langston indicated in an undated letter that he had a three-day engagement for the French film covering black military involvements overseas in WWI and also asked for a special showing of all three of the first three Lincoln titles.

would travel to these smaller markets and, after a show, the Lincoln title would be demoed for the manager with the offer being a subsequent showing on percentages, 60% for the LMPC, who also provided ad matter, and 40% for the theater.[206] On the national circuit the goal was to receive a rental fee of $20 per night for the two-and three-reel titles, $35 for two nights, and the theater was generally expected to put a few additional dollars toward balancing out the cost of heralds, one- and three-sheet photo spreads, and perhaps a slide which would be used to promote the film on-screen. After the first run the pictures continued to circulate with the daily rental fee falling to $5 per day.[207]

It is worth noting that, when the pictures went to smaller towns the LMPC dealt with low-capacity houses run by entrepreneurial pillars of those communities, men scrambling to sustain their theater operations, which were usually side endeavors. For instance, there was the mulatto William H. Lawrie, M.D., of Cape Girardeau, Missouri, who wrote on his medical office's letterhead of his inability to afford the usual Lincoln rental fees as his theater had only 200 seats.[208] The good doctor had been in 1896 the only black in a class of 200 to graduate from the Omaha Medical College. There was also Walter C. Kennedy, a mulatto from Knoxville, Tennessee who managed the Gem Theatre but conducted his business with the LMPC on letterhead from his short-lived W.C. Kennedy Jewelry Company, Inc., which he began after working as a printer and jeweler at the white-owned

[206] George Johnson, 'A Report of a Trip…,' Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[207] A letter from the Champion Theatre Company dated 12/13/1916 noted that *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition* had been offered at $5 a day and was declined as it was not at that time considered first run, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[208] Letter from W.H. Lawrie to George Johnson, 4/1/1917, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

Hope Brothers jewelry concern.[209] These were men of mixed-race heritages, like George and Noble, who were part of a New Negro push that often had roots in personal histories involving close and regular contact with whites, a positioning which meant they were active in mainstream endeavors that produced material advantages relative to most others from the black communities to which segregation forced them to return.[210] These businessmen were the ground troops of DuBois' talented tenth, the leaders of the race who were using their intellect, hard work, and relationships with sympathetic whites to punch through the barriers American society had placed before the race and they were networking across the country in an attempt to build a functioning Negro community which could provide for itself.

Distribution did not get easier as time went on. There were always eleventh hour telegrams requesting ad materials or the mailing of a film to the hinterlands of America with instructions to get to Gary through Chicago, for example, the bustle that made the request come to fruition, and the struggle to collect fees and get them back to the home office. At one point the New Orleans man, D. Thomas Ireland, was passing through Atlanta

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[209] Letter from Walter C. Kennedy to George Johnson, 1/17/1917, Microfilm, GPJ Collection; Information on Kennedy's background came from entries in Knoxville directories found under 'U.S. Directories 1821-1989 for Walter C (F) Kennedy,' Ancestry.com, 1907 (printer, Hope Bros.), 1910 (jeweler, Hope Bros.), 1916 (simply listed as jeweler while his son, Walter E. Kennedy, was listed as a clerk with W.C. Kennedy); Also note that George's correspondence with theater representatives included a 1917 letter from William D. Freeman, a mulatto shoemaker from Spartanburg, South Carolina, who wrote to George on the letterhead of his Champion Shoe Repairing Factory, Microfilm, GPJ Collection; Freeman was listed as a mulatto in the 1910 U.S. census found under his name on Ancestry.com.

[210] Untitled, undated newspaper article found under 'Newspapers & Publications results for William H. Lawrie,' Ancestry.com.; Lawrie was listed as a mulatto in the 1920 U.S. Census found at Ancestry.com.

on his way to Chattanooga, Tennessee when he happened upon an old print of *The Trooper of Troop K*, which was immediately sent back to California.[211] So very much rode on the efficacy and integrity of the agents. One of George Johnson's most trusted men was James H. Goins, who hailed from Minnesota. Goins was a stand up fellow who shared George's attention to detail. One of Goins' receipts, which constituted a sort of report for a showing to the Minnesota Home Guard, which was mostly, if not entirely white, provides an exemplary look into the set up of a showing in a non-theater space. Goins' included information about every aspect of the evening, including a note on the weather, which, if poor, could be counted on to cut attendance and therefore was part of the scale used to judge the success and worthiness of the title. The guard was shown a double feature which consisted of the 1917 Charlie Chaplin short *The Immigrant* and the third Lincoln production *The Law of Nature*, which was met with the 'consensus of opinion that it was a better play than *The Trooper*, which was the best ever shown here of its kind,' an aside indicating that films depicting Negroes were not necessarily uncommon fare for such audiences and that some notice of the company's improvement could be gauged by observing a repeat, captive audience.[212] The LMPC was charged for advertising in several local newspapers, rental of the projector and an operator, drayage of that machine, an orchestra, the Chaplin title, and messenger and express fees. The agreement was on percentages, but showing to a viewership kept by a state body meant an additional guarantee of the usual $20 rental fee and the ability to charge $.50 a head, a premium at

[211] Telegram to GPJ, November 18, 1921, GPJ Collection, Reel 7, p. 345b.
[212] Receipt/Report from J.H. Goins, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

the time. 292 viewed the film and, after the above noted expenses and Goins 11% take, the LMPC received a remittance of $44.40.[213]

Exhibitors were wary of booking films made by blacks at the time the LMPC started, likely skeptical that the quality would be inadequate after, as Langston put it, 'the junk that has been foisted upon them in the guise of "features."'[214] Charles Turpin, the proprietor of St. Louis' Booker Washington Theatre, noted that he had some trepidation when first scheduling a Lincoln film as he considered so may films by or about blacks to be unworthy. After viewing *The Trooper of Troop K*, which he found to have been a 'Hellover good picture,' he felt the LMPC had 'struck the Key Note in colored pictures' and thereby stood at the vanguard of a substantive Negro response to the issue of the manner in which the black public image was to be managed.[215] Watching the audience respond positively to the film led him to reconceive not only the race's ability to produce quality moving pictures, but also the race's collective ability to appreciate '"Dramas" by and all colored cast,' which is to say the race's ability to imagine and accept blackness being played out in a serious, sober, middle class milieu.[216] For Turpin the existence of the film and the experience of the film were cultural and almost political, a moment of redefinition and a step toward a different future.

While in many later instances black audiences chafed at the lack of polished continuity or the cheap backdrops and could erupt into outbursts of laughter at inopportune

[213] Ibid.
[214] Letter from Tony Langston to George Johnson, 10/10/1916, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[215] Letters from Charles Turpin to George Johnson, 11/21/1916, 9/17/1917, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[216] Ibid.

moments during the viewing of a race picture, the early returns on the Lincoln films were largely positive even though some had expected a film made by blacks to disappoint.[217] Once the films had been released and their quality was deemed acceptable there arose questions of whether the titles could truly have been the product of a black-owned company. This issue was reportedly investigated by Noah Thompson, a California Representative of the National Comfort Committee for Colored Soldiers and, with some relief, he returned a verdict which refuted suggestions that the LMPC was white-run.[218] His report further classed the Lincoln concern as being 'one of the most promising corporations that it has been the Negro's privilege to absolutely OWN AND CONTROL' (bold in original). Race here performs a pair of imputations by acknowledging that quality and reliability were considered to be associated with whiteness while celebrating the coming of proof that such was not truly the case as the feats of a single black-owned company had shown the same abilities and promise as a white-owned company. This promise was taken as signaling the potential of such for the entire race. The folkish logics and misapprehensions regarding race were challenged as untrue where the binary of black pathology and white promise was concerned, and the resulting suggestion was that blacks and whites were essentially equivalent. The creation of quality products stood to help create the markets the business needed and to rehabilitate the race's public and self-image.

[217] Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, p. 6.
[218] 'Lincoln Motion Picture Company Stock not Owned by White Men,' newspaper article, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

Advertising: Addressing and Creating Consumer Needs

With the 1917 release of *The Law of Nature*, a melodrama about the pitfall of the urban malaise, the LMPC had put out three films which were met with across-the-board excitement from the Negro community and statements pronouncing them the best of their kind or the best Negro film produced to that point were ubiquitous in the praise heaped on the company. The business ethos of that time often spoken of commercial success as a matter of being aware of the best methods and operating knowledge, a view that held business could be mastered in an almost scientific manner. H. D. Abbott of Topeka's Apex Theater stated with confidence that Lincoln films were of such quality and of such interest within the community that 'no wide awake colored exhibitor will lose money…if he handles it in an intelligent way' as, 'for a stimulant to business, I find nothing better than pictures produced by Negroes.'[219] Indeed stimulating business was a constant concern and promotion had to be undertaken at every step and in every way available. The company had product that would sell, now they needed to let the public know who and what they were. Advertising was the primary method of promotion and provides some insight into how the company wanted to be viewed and, as a business issue, how they thought consumers could be reached.

The Progressive Era followed a period of tremendous growth for industries that reached across the nation and as national sales grew the practice of promoting goods via advertisement took off, as well. Moreover, advertising methods took on the findings of psychology more and more during this time frame as it was increasingly accepted that

[219] Letter from H.D. Abbott, Manager, and signed off by John Wright, proprietor, to George Johnson, 8/25/1916.

sales could be increased by associating the product with the consumer's instinctual, non-rational needs.[220] The notion of association, that human cognition was a string of connected memories or ideas, suggested to advertisers that the idea of their product, even the brand name, could be attached to other ideas or emotional content held by the consumer regarding their wants and needs and that the fulfillment of those needs would then be more likely to lead the consumer to purchase that particular product.[221] Advertisements asked that the consumers reimagine themselves, as they would be after consumption, a version of the self that had been enhanced, even made more complete or like the self as the individual had imagined it should be. Moreover, the idea of self-as-it-should-be was not wholly derived from the individual, but was influenced by the advertisement and the relationships that the person had with family and community, groups made up of individuals who were also susceptible to the influence of the ads. In this way advertisements bore into both singular and collective psyches and shifted expectations of not only the consumer experience, but what constituted happiness and the good life. The imagination was engaged and the image the consumer had of the self in the future and of that future became an active part of how well being was managed.[222] The public was thereby led to find contentment in the meeting of their needs via consumerism and, as advertiser Lee Galloway wrote in 1913, 'advertising in turn became the means whereby new wants were created and old desires quickened to such a degree that both

[220] A. Michael McMahon, 'An American Courtship: Psychologists and Advertising in the Progressive Era,' *American Studies*, Vol. 13, No.2 (1972), pp. 5-18.
[221] Ibid., p. 7.
[222] Ibid., p. 12.

production and consumption were stimulated and industrial progress was promoted.'[223] When *The Denver Star* promised George in a March 18, 1918 letter that they were trying to make the showing of one the Lincoln Titles 'the thing of this week' for the black entertainment dollar in that city, the suggestion was that the promotion of the film was the central to an overall plan to create and corner the weekly allotment of entertainment spending in that locale's black community.[224] The Lincoln films and the advertisements heralding their exhibition were important parts of the race's efforts to create and maintain a sub-national economy.

Much of the advertisement came from newspaper spots or magazines and ad space in periodicals cost money that the LMPC had to manage judiciously. The Pittsburgh Courier agreed to run publicity free of charge and their sporting editor was charged with attending to those ads. Sometimes, as in the case of *The Kansas City Sun*, the paper could be coaxed into taking Lincoln stock. *The Sun* accepted $40 in stock for print space and did so because of a belief that the company would prosper and because the pictures themselves were seen as 'a valuable asset to the race.'[225] Most of the newspapers that were contacted wanted to work with the LMPC, but they were often wary of chiselers and fly-by-night affairs and, generally needing capital, also wanted the company to buy print space rather than trade for stock. It was understood that carrying stories on the establishment of the company or the release of its films could be seen as advertising. W.E.B. Dubois himself responded to the LMPC's submission of information to *The Crisis* by welcoming any story

[223] Ibid., p. 15.
[224] Letter from The Denver Star to George Johnson, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[225] Letter from Nelson Crews, Editor, to George Johnson, 5/12/1917, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

that noted the good works of members of the race before then dryly adding that the magazine could not 'push commercial enterprises except through our advertising columns.'[226] One option that was commonly used involved the papers printing positive news stories about the company, which could contain release information from George Johnson's desk, in exchange for purchased ad space.[227]

When it is considered that the ads and 'news' items about the LMPC *and* its product could operate in much the same manner, and that much of the distribution was done by newspaper men who had a pecuniary interest in manipulating the potential audiences, the company's potential for cultural suggestion via both its business methods and its film schedule can be seen as considerable. The race film industry in general, and the LMPC in particular, embraced many of the then new psychologically based advertising strategies by sensationalizing the product and presenting facts related to the films and their production in ways that communicated with the public's more subconscious needs. One *Chicago Whip* article plainly hailed to the public and the business world the importance of advertising by way of a glib little rhyme:

> The great big bank or little store
> Must advertise if they endure
> Your carefree business will close
> its eyes
> And die if you don't advertise.[228]

[226] Letter from W.E.B. Dubois, 6/27/1916, GPJ Collection, Reel 7, LMPC, p. 364.
[227] Letter from L. W. Washington, GM of Pullman Porter's Review, 2/20/1917, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

[228] H. David Murray, 'The Value of Advertising,' *The Chicago Whip*, 7/9/1919.

The Lincoln ads liberally sprinkled in suggestive language ('Thrilling!''Wonderful') with details about the showings which communicated more general ideas about the company, such as noting that *The Trooper of Troop K* would be showing 'continuous from 2 to midnight,' the suggestion being that demand could afford no rest.[229] Both ads of varying sorts and columns offered not only information about the productions but reviews that included testimonials, such as a note from Madame C.J. Walker noting that Trooper was 'most inspiring.'[230] This dragnet of promotional material suggests that the company believed that the public had to be inundated with information about their product in order to lure shy nickels and dimes from the pockets of entertainment seekers. It is also testament to the diversion available in the city, which included music, vaudeville, and Negro sporting events.[231] The ad campaigns also worked to communicate that the Lincoln Company cared about the tastes and expectations of the public. It was not enough to promise excitement or a product over which there was a competition. The potential consumer needed to know that the company was producing a good with the consumer's interests at heart. For instance, *the Defender* ran ads for *The Trooper of Troop K* which noted the film's use of 350 people, including actual cavalrymen, cowboys, Mexicans, and horses, which let the public and theater managers know that the production was keen on

[229] Advertisement for The Trooper of Troop K, The Chicago Defender, 10/17/1916, p. 4.
[230] 'The Secret of Getting Rich,' Box 68, GPJ Collection.
[231] For an excellent look into the detailed world of the entertainment options available to the race's growing Progressive Era urban dwellers, see Davarian Baldwin's *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2007)

taking care of the audience's interests in authenticity and had gone to extra lengths to provide the audience with a quality product.[232]

The same print spaces that were devoted to promoting advertisement and providing such could also pull back the curtain on the seamy underbelly of the ad game when such suited their purposes. One article allegedly reproduced a letter from an advertisement poster company which was sent to white businesses catering to significant Negro traffic in an attempt to drum up subscriptions for the company's Palmolive soap account. The problem was not that a myriad of new advertisement technologies were going to be used to get soap into stores frequented by Negroes, but that the company had included in the signature portion of the letter the prefatory phrase 'Yours for Nigger Business,' a revelation that white-controlled promises of service or quality products could front nasty racist attitudes which the black community might not want to support with their commerce, attitudes which might mean the content of the ads could not be trusted.[233] Revealing the letter to Negro readers in a Negro newspaper was a sideways method of elevating the idea of black business as a bulwark against feeding white supremacy with black dollars. Thus, when the Lincoln ads repeatedly noted that their films were dramas 'written, acted, owned, and operated by our people,' such can be read as both a play to notions of a collective racial gain which could be attained through the practice of blacks patronizing black-owned businesses and a promise that the race's shared interest in the

[232] Movie advertisement, *The Chicago Defender*, 11/11/1916, p. 4.
[233] 'Yours for Nigger Business,' *The Chicago Defender*, 8/5/1916, p.2.

project meant the product, even the ad itself, could be trusted to address the reader's need to feel cared for or respectfully taken into consideration.[234]

The Stardom of Noble Johnson

The biggest stimulation to business that the LMPC could provide was its star President, Noble Johnson. Noble was billed as the biggest Negro star in the world, which was translated at times to 'The Ebony Francis Bushman,' an attempt to equate him with one of Hollywood's reigning white male leads of the time who was also known for his tremendous physique.[235] A mulatto who was too darkly complected to pass for white, Johnson nonetheless had features that made him a candidate for membership in any number of ethnic groups. His straight or wavy hair, square jaw, and a large, corporeal presence commanded by a broad face that was easy to read in photos and on screen made him a visual focal point that was hard to ignore and, as a result, even in minor roles involving few, if any, spoken lines, he brought a gravity to his performances that made him noticeable and therefore very useful. Noble Johnson was a raw, physical frame that carried widely recognized markers of attraction - the full mouth, masculine brow, and sure movement of healthy vigor – and easily took on additional indicators of this or that ethnicity in a way that quickly communicated exoticism, power, and even danger. Noble was a perfect fit as a lead actor in Lincoln narratives that were written around the hyper-masculine aura Noble commanded. The ads and planted stories of Noble's past and his

[234] Movie advertisement, *The Chicago Defender*, 9/23/1916, p. 3.
[235] 'Movie Gleanings,' *The Chicago Defender*, 9/9/1916, p. 3; Information on Francis Bushman is taken from Lon and Debra Davis, *King of the Movies: Francis X. Bushman* (Duncan, Oklahoma: Bear Manor Media, 2009).

true life endeavors and talents helped to guide and encourage the public's role in establishing the social and cultural importance or meaning of Noble's notoriety and stardom, of his position as one of the first nationally renowned and celebrated film stars to emerge from the Negro population in connection with serious dramatic roles.

The Universal titles in which Noble performed often received promotion for their showings in black theaters that touted him as a feature attraction, and for those black audiences he was the draw. Take for instance a card used to ready the black patrons of Birmingham, Alabama's Savoy Theatre for a showing of the 1917 Universal serial *The Red Ace* which starred Marie Walcamp and Lawrence Peyton. The Savoy card paired Noble with Walcamp as the featured actor, though no picture of the two together was included. The card presented Noble as a 'great big chap,' playing up his multi-faceted talents as a horse-trainer, lumber jack, boxer, swimmer, and rancher while urging the would-be viewers to 'Come see one of your race that has entered the game.'[236] Though Johnson was to play a Native American character in the series, the ad for the Negro audiences made it clear that the man beneath the costume was one of their lot, a black man, and the strong insinuation of the card was that the attraction of seeing him on the screen was directly a matter of observing with their own eyes the success of a person like themselves, a success based on a worldliness and ability that caused him to be publicly put forth in a play opposite a white woman. This was a display of blackness unbound, freed by talent and associations with whiteness which communicated to black audiences that new possibilities were afoot.

[236] 'The Red Ace' promo card, GPJ Collection.

A February 22, 1918 letter from the manager at the Birmingham Savoy noted that Noble's stardom was such that the manager had ordered 500 photos of the heart-throb at four cents a piece to give away to the theater's female patrons.[237] The manager stated that Noble was well known in that sector's black consumer community and that any picture with him in it would likely perform well. It was also noted that the theater had done good business with Noble's Universal serials *Red Ace* and *Bull's Eye* a couple of weeks earlier and the advertising pieces that had been made for those viewings were being sent on to Atlanta where they were to be used at a theater that was preparing to open.[238] The Savoy was so keen on Noble and the advertisement of his stardom that they asked if there were any kind of ad matter that could be used to adorn the manager's personal automobile with his image.[239] Numerous letters from theater managers or well-wishers noted Noble Johnson was a star attraction. Johnson's celebrity was central support for the growth of Negro entertainment businesses and part of the reach of his appeal was tangled up with his position as a star both in black-made films and those produced by Hollywood.

The attention that was often paid in the advertisements, supporting stories, and news releases about Noble's ability to present himself as a member of differing races and ethnicities can be seen as an offering which referred to an ability to play out the fuller aspects of a humanity which might have otherwise been encumbered by race or blackness. Noble's gift for shape-shifting, for being 'realistic' and yet multiple essences, as it were, over the course of several screenings, not only made him highly employable during the

[237] Letter from E.H. Tomppert to George Johnson, 2/22/1918, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[238] Ibid.
[239] Letter from W. H. Tomppert, 6/6/1918, Microfilm, GPJ Film Collection.

years wherein the LMPC was trying to establish itself, those qualities made his stardom transcendent. Perhaps most importantly, Noble was being presented as a star of both mainstream, Hollywood films and race films, a fact that allowed his celebrity in the black community to view his aura of success and the example he set against the negative stereotypes of blackness as having been based to some degree on reality. As the Lincoln films were some of the very first race titles, and as complaints from the black arts media had not yet begun earnestly complaining of race films casting according to tone, which is to say replicating is the casting the color-coded hierarchies of society which valued dark-skinned blacks less than light-skinned blacks, Noble's appearance and persona were not problematic from the standpoint of charges of black self-denigration based on skin tone.[240]

Noble looked over and authorized many of the individual pieces of ad matter. Even if he was not energized or otherwise quickened by the business aspects of the company he was careful to care for the handling of his visage.[241] Noble created a prospectus for himself as a star actor that had appeared in Lubin, Reliance, Universal, and Lincoln pictures and who also had written, directed, and produced. This bit of hype, sent out from his office in Universal City, California and from George's office in Omaha, was calculated to assist melding Noble's growing profile with the national rise of black entertainment centers. A photo of the actor with his hair neatly coiffed and parted, three-piece suit and bow tie,

[240] For an excellent discussion regarding the issue of the black media backlash against such implicit evaluations of color tones in the second decade of race films see Jane Gaines, *Fire and Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 147-149; Also see Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film, Exp. Ed.* (New York; Continuum Publishing Company, 1991 (1973)), p. 114.

[241] Letter from George Johnson to Noble Johnson, undated, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

announced him as 'the favorite of millions' and listed his credits, including all of the Lincoln films. This was issued to Negro theater managers with a questionnaire and the assertion that cooperation was required for both parties to profit as 'Your problems are OURS and our problems YOURS.'[242] The Lincoln Motion Picture Company did not command the cash flow to build there own studio or to purchase theaters. There was no film exchange that could front Negro production company operating costs, so those movie making concerns and the exhibition houses which in part relied on their output shared a need for the producers to operate efficiently. Noble and the Lincoln company aimed to put themselves at the center of an operational response to those problems, a position that would make the company synonymous with the highest priorities of black theater management across the country. To that end, the questionnaires were quite detailed and sought information about, among other things, the race of the owners and their patrons, how much experience they had with race films, especially those of Noble Johnson, and the advertising practices and budgets of those theaters.[243] Noble's connection with the Lincoln titles was interlaced with questions about the Lubin and Universal companies and the theater managers were effectively invited to conflate one with the other.[244] The decision to build the strength of the business on such comparisons would come back to haunt the company.

[242] Noble Johnson's Prospectus, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[243] Questionnaires for Noble Johnson's Prospectus, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[244] Ibid.

The LMPC as Uplift Businesses

Shortly after George took the first two Lincoln titles for their first test exhibitions outside of California, showings at small theaters in Omaha, Nebraska, he felt confident enough in the product to arrange an exhibition with the National Negro Business League which held its annual meet in Kansas City during August 1916. *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition*, the first Lincoln film, was used as the special attraction.[245] In another instance a letter from The Pittsburgh Courier announced that the local Young Women's Auxiliary was hoping to hold a showing of the Lincoln films in order to further their uplift programs by way of raising the demand for race pictures.[246] The film fit well with NNBL convention's culture of self-reliant and upwardly striving blackness and followed race pioneer William Foster's declarative observation that while film production was 'one of the biggest money making propositions of all time… we must not sleep on Race Uplift.'[247]

Uplift in the Progressive Era was an oft-referenced concept of moral, social, and economic improvement, centered in the home and patriarchal family, that, according to

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[245] George Johnson, 'A Report of a Trip…,' Microfilm, GPJ Collection. The National Negro Business League had used moving pictures at various of their prior meetings, along with 'interesting pictures of the Race and Illustrated Songs,' to provide clean entertainment which would support the group's overall mission of uplift during conventions. For instance, the NNBL exhibited 'A Tip to Tuskegee' at a week long convention. These were pictorial efforts, as opposed to dramas, but they demonstrate that the idea of putting uplift imagery on the big screen had been executed at least 5 or 6 years before the Lincoln company began production. See Official Souvenir Program for National Negro Business League convention, 1910, NNBL Records, Reel 11, Frame 0133.

[246] Letter from Ira F. Lewis, City Editor *The Pittsburgh Courier*, to George Johnson, 1/22/1918, Microfilm, GPJ Collection. While the promotion of the race's advancement was to have been forwarded by the films, the proposed remuneration was a matter of good will as the hope from Pittsburgh was that the LMPC could provide the titles on loan.

[247] William Foster, 'Taking Pictures,' from the Foster Photo Play Company's prospectus, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

Kevin Gaines, sought to follow through on the spirit that animated post-Civil War Negro efforts to come out of slavery and up the nation's ladder of opportunity.[248] Unfortunately, as Gaines points out, this program of middle class mores clouded and undermined the rhetoric of unity by at the same time assuming that there were class divisions within the race which trended toward the supposed heights of DuBois' talented tenth and the lows of the pathologically poor, uneducated urban masses. These notions of patriarchy and class were particularly harmful, according to Gaines, as, not only did they marginalize the efforts of women and those perceived as being part of the lower classes, but the idea of class being relied upon in many uplift circles was distorted by perceptions that relied rather heavily on cultural signposts rooted in white supremacist logics as opposed to on-the-ground economic realities in black communities or over the nation as a whole.[249]

The Lincoln films, and, following their lead, race films in general, were primarily melodramatic in nature. The instabilities typical of the genre were implicitly or explicitly connected with experiencing blackness in a racist American setting and the backbone of the remedies presented involved moral rectitude which fueled hard work and winning talents that in one way or another overcame racism. The heavy repetition of the claim that the Lincoln films were 'clean' rested heavily on the above notions of uplift logic and middle class morality. While we will return to this issue again in Chapter 4 to more closely look at the nuances of the narrative content of the Lincoln movies, it is important to note that implicit in much of the rhetoric calling for support of race businesses were uplift logics

[248] Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
[249] Ibid., p. 46.

both supportive and troubling, and the Lincoln men held some of those competing views. For instance, one letter from Tony Langston to George Johnson spelled out the 'dope' on Chicago's Ebony Film Corporation, which consisted mostly of labeling their output with the epithet of 'comedies' and listing the names and positions of the major movers and players in that organization, including notice that the money and on-set direction were white. "I know most of the Shines with them,' Langston sniffed, 'and they don't count for much.'[250] The battle to bring uplift to the screen was being waged against both the iniquitous shadings of the white power structure and those viewed as lackadaisical laggards from the black populace. That aside from Langston provides a good look at the ways uplift mindsets could easily fall into tendencies toward class stratifications that were more accurately considered cultural judgments with unfortunate roots in white supremacist logics.[251]

The news stories and ads for the Lincoln titles were quite often found in the company of editorials or extolling the necessity of good hygiene, upright appetites for consumption, and proper behavior among members of the race.[252] One such piece noting that 'Thrift in the hustle and bustle of life…is the means to success and happiness…the necessities and luxuries…independence, pride, and respect' was found next to information about blood pressure health that warned against excessive food and alcohol intake.[253] The sanctimony could get pretty thick. These were directives from the black middle class intoning that the

[250] Letter from Tony Langston to George Johnson, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[251] Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p. 46.
[252] For examples of such editorials consider a pair from *The Chicago Whip*, 'Anthrax,' under 'Health Hints,' 5/15/1920 and 'Scurvy and the Teeth,' 11/13/1920, p.8.
[253] 'The "If" in Thrift and Life,' *The Chicago Whip*, 12/4/1920, P. 8.

unwashed from the countryside take on their more mainstream values and habits for the sake of the race, directives which the newcomers and lower classes often ignored or, where entertainment and personal care were concerned, turned toward their needs for diversion and expression in the realms of music, beauty product, the consumption of spectator sports, and film.[254]

The Race Film Business Family

The LMPC's initial run of success and the excitement of the arrival of a legitimate Negro production house dedicated to clean dramas brought out imitators and grafters intent on exploiting the blooming race film market. One doppelganger arose as the New Jersey-based Frederick Douglas Film Co. Capitalized at $100,00 and following the Lincoln Company's lead of naming the venture after a nationally recognized figure associated with emancipation and African-American striving, the FDFC was able to manage only a single narrative picture which, again taking after the Lincoln example of *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition*, was entitled *The Colored American Winning His Suit*.[255] The competition heated up quickly. The world of making films on the margins of the industry was filled with shady dealers and operations that, even if well meaning, could expire in an instant. Caution was absolutely necessary, even suspicion, and the cross-section of business and claims on morality that the LMPC represented was intimately coiled up with a need to maintain a reputation for forthright honesty. For instance, a letter from J. A Jackson of the

[254] For an in depth look at the many inspired ways that the masses developed expressive and creative versions of an urban New Negro experience that went beyond settled, middle class mores, see Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes*.
[255] Notes for The Frederick Douglas Film Company, Microfilm, Frederick Douglas Film Company, p. 25b, Reel 5, GPJ Collection.

Associated Negro Press who, even though he was friendly with George and made an almost apologetic clarification that he had no worries about him, still felt compelled to include the de rigueur announcement that his support for the Lincoln project required that it be 'entirely legitimate in character.'[256] George was capable of carrying that type of vigilance to logical extremes in his efforts to safeguard the Lincoln position. The Delight Film Company out of Chicago earned George's suspicion and this led him to contact the company through the mail using the alias of Robert Dale and to send an associate to investigate that company's operations under the pretense of wanting to act in their productions. George's plant, brother in-law Ira MacGowan, reported back that the Delight set up was a 'swindle joint' pretending to be a school for acting with nothing in the way of a production on hand.[257]

George also kept tabs on the Democracy Film Corporation, out of Los Angeles, who managed to put out one picture, *Injustice*, also titled *Lonely Hearts*, a romance involving race issues and some promotion of the Negro soldier. The company was headed by Sidney Dones, a black Los Angeles area real estate man who had been successful in that endeavor but knew nothing of film-making and, according to George, ended up being taken advantage of by his white partners, unskilled individuals posing as movie men. George carefully added the DFC's faults, noting that the film was unable to match the onscreen action with the titles cards, and that the film was not viable on a national level because of its content, which he stated 'borders on social equality.'[258] This comment regarding the on-

[256] Letter from J. A. Jackson to George Johnson, 11/8/1917, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[257] Notes on the Delight Film Company, Microfilm, GPJ Collection. George
[258] Notes on the Democracy Film Corporation, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

screen presentation of inter-racial relations helps us to understand the intended meaning and purposeful bounds the Lincoln films placed on their interaction with controversial racial subjects even as they attempted to present new images and scenarios of inter-racial interaction on screen. As we will see in Chapter 4, inter-racial interactions based on a shared sense of humanity or revised understandings of identity under circumstances of racial misidentification were treatable as grounds for improving status, demonstrating mastery and masculinity, and ultimately improving black material well being. The goal was not to promote inter-racial intimacies, or other themes, that would reduce the marketability of the films or cloud the aforementioned central themes.

George had a definite interest in following the other race film companies from the standpoint of posterity and he felt kinship with some of those ventures, though he was wary of a dysfunctional family dynamic in the race film game. The competition between the various companies was not simply one based on tussles over market share. One can discern a whiff of the antagonism that existed between classes of material and perspective in Langston's not uncommon use to the term 'shine' when discussing blacks for whom he did not have respect or in one of his letters to George which notes of the leader of a struggling rival, the Unique Film Company, that 'ten cats couldn't catch one rat in the seat of his pants he's so raggedy.' However, if there was the chance that real money, deep 'white' money, were available, the company's mission, uplift protocols, and business could fall away from one another at odd angles.

George turned over every stone searching for the operating expenses for which the LMPC perpetually hungered. At one point, he was in dialogue with the white-owned Ebony

Film Company despite the fact that, as previously noted, Langston and *The Defender* had carried on a several weeks long harangue of that organization due to their continual presentation of the exact kind of degrading content to which the LMPC was supposed to be opposed. The exigencies of distribution in the film game may have dropped George's line of sight from the high ground. Hiss chief interest in Ebony was their financial backing and the fact that they had a distribution deal with General Films, a major exchange that had been instrumental in Thomas Edison's attempts to monopolize the earliest days of the film industry through his Motion Picture Patents Company.[259] A deal with Ebony seemed like it would guarantee a schedule of releases that would outperform the Lincoln's prior output. George carried on a spate of correspondence with that company in order to feel out the prospects of a merger that could lead to the holy grail of a million dollar capitalization.[260] Some of the correspondence was forwarded to Noble with a note that it might be worth the Lincoln Company's while to pursue a merger as the Ebony group was backed by 'white men with money.'[261] The May 1918 financial statement for the Ebony Company indicated that they had a surplus of $1,466,125, which, along with the capitalization of $500,000, gave them total holdings of almost $2 million. Film business accounting is always a slippery affair and $1,900,000 of that money was in unissued stock, 40,000 feet of negative, contracts estimated for a year, and finished films, posters, and advertising matter. George would later state that the Ebony company reached heights of $2.5 million

[259] Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture 1915-1928* (New York, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1990) p. 63.
[260] Several letters spanning 5/8/1918 through 9/21/1920 address the LMPC's flirtation with the Ebony group, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[261] Letter from Ebony to George Johnsons apparently forwarded to Noble Johnson with an addendum discussing business possibilities, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

in holdings and were able to release 16 films, one of the high water marks for race film production catalogues.[262] Despite flirtations that spanned more than a year no Ebony deal was reached, possibly due in part to the problems of product quality that made the Ebony questionable from the start. George logged into his 'confidential' notes that the Ebony productions were 'poor, rotten,' suffering falling demand, and funded by depleting the company's stocks.[263] A good company, white-backed or not, was hard to find.

Mining for Black Diamonds: Financing the LMPC

The life's blood of profit in the film business may be distribution, but the heart of production is finance. The brilliance of the Hodkinson method of distribution is that it provided the financing that made studios work on industrial levels of non-stop production that then kept the distribution aspect of the game flush, as well. Because the Hodkinson distribution method was not available to the LMPC that system's reliable financing was also not going to provide wind for the Lincoln sails. Equity financing, which involves the raising of operating capital by trading a share of ownership in the venture for cash, was the primary method of raising funds for race films as debt financing, which involves borrowing money which is to be repaid over an agreed upon time and at agreed upon interest rates, was not generally available. In short, most investment banks were not going to lend to black-owned concerns. The company would have to raise the money and this meant turning once again to the race community, which is to say the nation's black

[262] George P. Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 271.
[263] '(Confidential Field Report)' on the Ebony Company, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

population and calls for self-help and unity as expressed via commercial dealings with one another.

As African Americans spread out over the country black merchants began to communicate with the wage earners and professionals of the race in an attempt to establish commercial relationships that would grow their businesses while also grounding a new national identity for blacks as consumers participating in the American capitalist fray. This was a project that sought to bring blacks out from under the obscured shadows of bondage and racial oppression and into a future that would bear black understandings of the dormant power of the race's commercial potentiality. Uplift as commerce.

George understood very well the importance of financing for a film production company's ongoing prospects for good health and he wrote a piece noting that the constant need to raise funds from disparate and precarious sources was 'the one thing that has menaced the success of Negro Film Organizations.'[264] The lack of adequate amounts of start-up funding led to a need to try to raise cash for ongoing operations or cease production while waiting for the returns of one film's first run earnings. The goal was to raise money for the production of films at a rate that would make them effective on an industrial level. The idea was to be able to have enough money to produce one film while exhibiting another and, ideally, pre-producing a third. Coming up with the money often meant stock offerings that were widespread in practice but quite unstable and unreliable in nature. The many advertisements for new Negro film companies grew with near-exponential vigor during the length of the Lincoln run, and, as many were not credible due

[264] 'Financing of Negro Film Organizations,' Microfilm, GPJ Film Collection.

to either incompetence or fraud, an atmosphere was created wherein any fundraising via stock offerings had to be taken with some skepticism. One white-owned company, The Lincoln Pictures Classic, Inc., who tried to push stock while playing off the LMPC's good name, produced not a single title and saw five of their officers indicted for misuse of company funds and stock chicanery.[265] Fairly or unfairly, such ploys made raising the funds necessary to keep production rolling more difficult than they might otherwise have been and constantly threatened to undermine the aura of honest dealing that George fought hard to keep in effect.

In this atmosphere the LMPC floated stock options to the public and assured prospective stockholders that, in keeping with their production record to date, films would be made and from those films profits would accrue to those who had the foresight to invest in the company. A letter from Noble set out to assuage concerns that investments in the burgeoning company and the industry it represented had to be made in substantial amounts. Noble noted that $15, an amount which could be saved in a few months of rerouting 15 cents per day from immediate pleasures such as ice cream or cigars, might eventually become worth a great deal more as the film business was at a fledgling state and, with proper participation from investors, the Lincoln Motion Picture Company was on the ground floor. It was noted that a $15 investment made at a similar stage in the Gillette Razor company was at that point worth $6,000 and an identical investment in Bell Telephone had ballooned in value to $30,000.[266] This approach was tailored to bring in

[265] Ibid.
[266] Notes on the LMPC, Microfilm, Lincoln Motion Picture Company, Reel 7, p. 337b, GPJ Collection.

dollars from as many of the race's economic levels as possible while creating a sense that African Americans could grow their economic profile individually and collectively just as shrewd whites who had thrown in with companies that went on to become wildly successful.

The more economically abled of the race were not neglected. A more elaborate letter composed during the company's first year explained that, in the context of a still-settling industry already the fifth largest in the country, investments with the right film company could experience fantastic levels of maturation. The letter dangled as proof the example of the Vitagraph Company which was reported as having been incorporated with $6,000 capital in 1904 and had grown in little more than a decade into a company with $25 million in shares authorized for distribution to shareholders.[267] The Lincoln company had erected a national presence with branch offices spread out over the country servicing theaters with clean, meritorious films that were creating brand name accountability that investors could count upon just as the audiences could. By April 10, 1917, the value of the stock had gone up from 75 cents a share to one dollar, a 33% increase that reached the stock's par value. On April 30, 1917, the company was given a permit to issue 25,000 shares of common stock. Investors were told that most of the risk had been removed during the furious first months of the company's establishment and that a commercial apparatus made to create profits from the production and distribution of race films had been fashioned by way of technical mastery, business acumen, and star power. The public was invited to partake of the coming profits by 'helping to furnish a further working

[267] Notes on the LMPC, Microfilm, Lincoln Motion Picture Company, Reel 7, p. 337a, GPJ Collection.

capital.'[268] The optimism of these enticements was not an instance of a simple hustle for dollars based on a promise of stupendous returns, though it was that, as well. It was also a strong assertion that the world of blacks and their financial dealings could be expected to work just as the world of whites did, that the physics of sound, timely investment would lead to measurable increases in the value of those holdings.

George and the LMPC released various pamphlets, full-page ads, and third-party studies in an attempt to provide potential investors with knowledge that would help them see the value of sinking cash into the Lincoln project. This was an advertising approach that dated back to before the advent of the more modern, psychologically driven methods of the Progressive Era. The idea was that consumers, especially the monied sort who would be likely to invest, were rational and, once properly appraised of the value available in a proposition, could be counted upon to respond accordingly, which is to say to invest.[269] Like many companies of the day, the Lincoln scheme was to mix a little of the new way with a healthy dose of the traditional. One such ad came under the blaring headline 'The Secret of Getting Rich!,' which invited the reader on an odyssey into a deluge of fact-driven announcements about investment success stories, the film industry's salient statistics, endorsements from leaders of the race, and the company's accomplishments and plans, which included the intent to produce films that would play in front of American whites and international audiences of every stripe.[270]

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[268] Ibid.
[269] A. Michael McMahon, 'An American Courtship: Psychologists and Advertising in the Progressive Era,' pp. 5-7.
[270] 'The Secret of Getting Rich!,' Advertisement from *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 9/28/16, Box 68, GPJ Collection.

The ad claimed the company had 'what ten million people want,' which, referring to the nation's population of blacks, meant that, being a race firm, it was to be expected that the race would support the venture.[271] What is more, the company made it absolutely clear that, in order to meet demand, 'we MUST HAVE MORE CAPITAL.'[272] The ad admitted that there was the possibility the LMPC could raise the money from 'white banking houses,' but, the offering of opportunity continued, the Lincoln people instead preferred to raise the money from 'a few members of the race.'[273] Though a basic response might have questioned why a company that had hip-pocketed the product and the demand needed capital, the request was transparent and constituted an attempt to raise cash by way of acting as a middle man between the smart money in the black community and that community's national, even international, entertainment needs. This was a black business plan that had aspirations of reaching out beyond the hold of black business circles and the black community was explicitly asked to join this endeavor.

'The Secrets of Getting Rich' was noted as a point of interest by C. Kirkwood, the editor of *The Industrial Era* out of Beaumont, Texas, who for good measure reported to George that the paper had also had gone ahead and ran the story about the investigation into the LMPC's bona fides as a black owned and operated business.[274] The worry over legitimacy was always lurking for race film companies and such may be why the records admit only spotty interest in the advertisements which aimed to attract investor dollars

[271] Ibid.
[272] Ibid.
[273] Ibid.
[274] Letter from C. Kirkwood to George Johnson, 12/11/1917, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

from the race at large.[275] Records from the latter days of the company would suggest that about 2,000 shares were issued to the buying public.[276] George would years later recount that 'We did quite a little business of selling stock in the mail nationally in different states, but not to the extent we should have because we didn't have the finances to do it in the shape it should have been done.'[277] There is a cheap irony in the claim of having too little in the way of finances to properly seek financing, but the need to have money in order to make money is not a hollow claim and at the end of the first two years of the LMPC's existence the issue of having the cash to make cash was far from resolved.

Conclusions

By 1918 the Lincoln Motion Picture Company had released three narrative titles and established themselves nationally as the top firm in the race film game, especially where 'clean' dramas of uplift were concerned. The company had produced a brand name product, a system of distribution, a methodology for handling ad matter, and they had an undeniably incandescent star, Noble Johnson, who shone even brighter for his connections with popular Hollywood serials and features. The details of the establishment and rise of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company not only tie in to the relationships that the Johnson

[275] While the GPJ collection has a few letters noting that potential investors were interested, looking forward to seeing a prospectus, etc., as found in a 4/20/1918 correspondence from E.A. Bibb, only one or two actually involve orders for stocks or deals trading stock far ad space. For another example, see the 5/10/1917 letter from Thomas Kennedy, editor and publisher of *The Kansas City Advocate*, noted that he was not a speculator but was 'interested and have enough faith in your ability to make this enterprise a success to go with you a little while at least.' Kennedy accepted $50 in stock in exchange for running Lincoln advertising.
[276] Letter from George Johnson to Harry Pace, 7/14/1920, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[277] George P. Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' pp. 146, 147.

family ethos of mobility helped to bring into their sphere, but it provides an important window into the multi-faceted approach the company took in getting the venture aloft and growing. The LMPC was forced to structurally and functionally face the varied issues of trust, economic health, disparities in localized needs, and state of the film industry on an intra-racial level while seeking to at least attempt to expand the business on an inter-racial level while also seeking funding on both sides of the color line. This chapter has thereby provided a look at how a vision of entrepreneurship ultimately aimed at a national, if not global, market came out of personal and group values and wherewithal, industry make-up, and the recognition of opportunities as they were seen in the context of changing temporal circumstances.

This chapter has provided an in depth look at the detail of how a black-owned and –operated business in the Progressive Era was erected from the ground up and fashioned into a going concern which was known nationally for its forward-thinking commercial methods and the uplifting, game-changing way their product, moving pictures, projected the black public image. As a result, this chapter has provided a look into the deepest recesses of the places where business, profits, and the production of culture met to assist in the promulgation of a range of new black identities that included middle class expectations, assumptions of technical mastery, and a complex of connections between belonging in America and America belonging to blacks. As a result, this chapter has provided an unusual look at both the cultural and economic milieus into which the race industry was sunk and an assessment of the connection between that culture and the entrepreneurs who ran those businesses, especially the Lincoln company. Throughout

these dialogues the steady iterations of African-American calls for the recognition of the humanity of blacks and access to markets beyond black communities helps to place the growth of black business sectors and their place in the answer to segregation in an adjusted light. The Lincoln film business unquestionably helped to provide the substance necessary for a nationwide field race business play based on meeting black needs for the consumption of entertainment and cultural artifacts while also propping up the leak of uplift mentalities into an important commercial venture. Class divisions that intertwined assessments of material standing with moralizing about that standing not only diffused the potential for deeper, broader unity within the race, but it also marked notice that within the expressed and doggedly pursued goal of creating a circuitry of race-oriented commerce that could support the goals of business ownership there was often also a desire to have it known that there were shared values, such as love of honesty or profits, between white and black and that those who loved honesty and profits existed on both sides of the veil. Business was a way to create and exploit black markets and a hopeful conduit to less confined lives.

Chapter 3

Star Dims to Blackness: The Limits of Race Based Business Models and the Fall of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company.

The ascent of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company was swift, dramatic, and worked an important influence over the entertainment fare that was available for African Americans during the close of the Progressive Era. The release of three narrative films, albeit only two and three reels in length, the establishment of a vibrant distribution system that made sure the films got to every coroner of the continental United States, plans for international exhibitions, and a growing array of theaters catering to, even owned by Negroes, provided an excellent base from which the company could be expected to grow. While the officers of the company were not particularly well schooled in the field of business, they proved quick learners and applied to the task of building the LMPC any forward-looking commercial strategy they could manage. There was a definite market for films made by and for blacks and the company had shown the nation that they were capable of providing the product. The future looked exceedingly bright. There was, though, at all times the problem of operational cash as, after making a film, the LMPC's lack of access to financing through distribution companies meant they had to wait for the revenue to trickle back via their own network of agents. The film industry was a labor-intensive, cash-hungry business and the Lincoln men knew that the initial build up of the company was in part a demonstrative run that needed to attract investment dollars that would propel a

production schedule that approximated the industrial regularity of the Hollywood studios. The company was also going to need to expand its talent base and organizational structure if it was to remain competitive. These would be daunting tasks for all who were in the race film game.

William Foster, first voice of the race film movement, had been very supportive of the Lincoln Company's entry into the business and had suggested in August 1916 that he would help with distribution, though he handled only product going to Chicago theaters.[278] However, in June of 1917, less that a year after offering his assistance, Foster was asking the LMPC for help in distributing his titles while posing some ominous questions to the upstart company. Foster wondered if high quality race films made for and shown in theaters designated for colored audiences would ever become truly profitable or if black on-screen bodies would ever be accepted in white houses outside of novelty and burlesque depictions. Foster had already reached the point of exasperation just as the Lincoln group was getting underway and bemoaned 'My only salvation is to join some big concern that can distribute my wares and some financial assistance.'[279] Foster's downcast report from a veteran's vantage pointed out some very basic and unavoidable problems for race film concerns. Their market was artificially limited and yet their audience was able to, and often did, consume the motion picture products of much more powerful and financially endowed competitors whose relative strength came in part from enjoying an audience base that was made up of the entire United States, in addition to growing global markets. For a race film company to survive fundraising would have to be a specialty and

[278] Letter from William Foster to George Johnson, 8/10/1916, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[279] Letter from William Foster to George Johnson, 6/1/1917, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

some other ingredients for success would have to be held in place. This chapter seeks to provide a look into the details of how the company tried to stabilize and cement its early successes and to thereby uncover the fullest meanings of its eventual failures. Not only will this provide information regarding the manner in which the company was run, but we will also be able to track with considerable specificity how it fell short of the goals of its ownership. Weaknesses in the overall race-based business model will therefore be available for some discussion and that inquiry will provide a fuller bedding for our substrate of questions about the ways that business and identity formation and maintenance worked in the black community of the late-Progressive Era. This chapter closes out a three-chapter suite which has sought to tell the story of a family and its practices and values regarding the inter-relations of business, nationwide mobility, and questions of racial identity, and how the specificity of those experiences played into the creation of a national business which, disseminating mass cultural products, amplified certain aspects of the family's experiences and values in ways that became part of a larger cultural upheaval that included the uplift movement and the Great Migration. The third chapter thereby completes our preparations for in-depth considerations of the substantive content of the mass media products offered by the Johnson family's entrepreneurial endeavors and the historical position that this story holds.

The Problem of Human Capital, Pt. 1: Noble Johnson's Resignation

The Lincoln Motion Picture Company was broadsided on July 31, 1918, by what would be the single most destructive blow the company would suffer: the resignation of Noble Johnson from the position of President and from appearances or connections with any

future LMPC productions. 'Nothing personal,' the telegram read, 'will retain my interest in firm but cannot devote the time to the business necessary for its success hence my resignation which will afford a vacancy for someone more efficient and capable and with more time and business experience.'[280] The loss of Noble as an officer in the company was not a great set back as he was essentially correct to note that he did not have time to attend to the business of the company. He was in front of the camera for two production companies and was not attendant to the details of the LMPC's day-to-day operations. For example, in one of his last letters to the company's management team Noble noted repeatedly that he could not state the value of assets or the exact depreciation of the assets which were connected with the company's initial incorporation, especially as he was not in regular contact with the branch offices or the Secretary, Clarence Brooks.[281] Noble Johnson's many gifts did not appear to truly encompass business management, especially when he was not being recompensed.

On the other hand, the loss of Noble as the star attraction and anchor of the brand loomed large. Noble's usage of his connections to Hollywood came back on the Lincoln Company as his resignation was the result of Universal wanting to quarantine one of the major support names in one of its serials from the competition presented by Noble's starring roles in the Lincoln films. Noble was playing the role of Sweeney Bodin in the *Bull's Eye* serial starring Eddie Polo. The Bodin character was strong enough that even several years later George would write that, though he had at that point dropped from site on the race film circuit, Noble was still popular as the audiences 'still remember

[280] 'Noble Johnson Resigns as Head of Lincoln Motion Picture Co.,' GPJ Collection.
[281] Letter from Noble Johnson to the officers of the LMPC, undated, GPJ Collection.

Sweeney.'[282] When the serials passed through the black entertainment districts they were being outpaced by the Lincoln titles as Noble, subordinated on the Universal cards, received star billing on the large, colorful lithographs preferred by the Company. The business model employed by the LMPC was in important part based on the assumption that blacks would pay to see blackness on screen instead of the absence or degradation of blackness in mainstream releases. That assumption was correct where the films starring Noble were concerned. However, the stardom that Noble built with the Lincoln titles stemmed in part from his appearances in Hollywood fare, a stardom that was thereby linked to the legitimacy and name power of the larger white firms and their growing notoriety as the world's foremost purveyors of the medium. As was noted in the last chapter the promotional literature that Noble sent out on behalf of building his profile in the black public eye invited the audiences and exhibitors to consider work with the Hollywood production companies as related with his Lincoln roles. This was a sort of free-agent action that worked outside the bounds of the contract that Noble had with Universal.

Even if the connection between Noble, the Lincoln films, and Hollywood was fostered only to highlight the meaning of his star turns in the race pictures, that stardom was in part the product of the audience's knowledge that Noble was also a respected presence in the white-controlled world of mainstream pictures. The black film entrepreneur was then using that notable acceptance in Hollywood to build star power in a competing race film business which he then plied to draw away from Universal exhibitions black audiences

[282] Letter from George Johnson to Noble Johnson, 9/27/1921, GPJ Collection.

who wanted to see *their* man in a more prominent position upon the screen.[283] The strategy of using the white firms to solidify his stardom in the minds of black viewers may have seemed safe, especially as important voices on the Universal lot had been instrumental in the initial incorporation of the Lincoln Company. However, in the extremely ruthless, cutthroat realm of the film business, direct competition was a highly contentious matter, especially where the source of the friction had so little power. Universal apparently felt the need to intercede and was able to force Noble's hand as they paid him more than the LMPC likely ever would. Noble Johnson was *their* man and the weakness of the Lincoln position meant that, if they wanted to compete with Universal titles, they would have to do so without the face time that Universal had lent the new Negro venture via the presentation of one of their contract actors as a feature Lincoln attraction.

Though the documentation does not explicitly indicate that Noble and Gant fully apprehended the potential for a clash of interests from the company's inception, it is exceedingly difficult to believe that the problem was not obvious and on the table from the beginning. George would later bluntly state in a letter to Noble that the company's founders were wholly aware that, while they were presenting Noble as the 'World's Greatest Negro Film Star,' the films their budding company produced would be played on the Negro theater circuit in competition with Hollywood productions in which Noble himself could be seen.[284] In fact, it seems the LMPC developed a practice to, whenever possible, book their titles to follow Noble's appearances in other films from white-owned

[283] 'Noble Johnson Resigns as Head of Lincoln Motion Picture Co.,' GPJ Collection.
[284] Letter from George Johnson to Noble Johnson, undated, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

companies in order to associate the Lincoln titles with those more established productions. George chastised Noble in the letter and stated that promoting himself and the LMPC in that manner without first having an agreement with Universal was a 'foolish trick.'[285]

The loss of Noble meant the loss of the company's star, of course, and in a business wherein the success of the product was so closely connected with the success of the sell, losing the star without an adequate replacement could mean losing eyes, which is to say, money. Clarence Brooks, an officer and stockholder in the company, would take over the leading male roles for the last two Lincoln titles, but his charisma and power in front of the camera pales when compared to that of Noble Johnson. In looking at Brooks, whose face was round and common and whose chassis was relatively small and unremarkable, one sees a clerk or an individual holding some other position down the hierarchical ladder. The archetype was lost and the company would not prove able to obtain a replacement. One small newspaper note reproduced a portion of Noble's resignation under the heading 'He Has Quit,' a phrase that conveys the sense that a beacon has given up lighting the path for others.[286] The race lost its leading man and the company was left without a key portion of their human capital and the good will they had cultivated with the black public.

The Problem of Human Capital, Pt. 2: The Bid for Oscar Micheaux

Noble's departure came just as the Lincoln group was attempting to expand their stable of creative talent, an undertaking that was absolutely essential to any long-term

[285] Letter from George Johnson to Noble Johnson, undated, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[286] Newspaper article, Microfilm, GPJ Film Collection.

intentions of competing in the endlessly mutating business of film production. Noble had represented a source of celebrity that helped establish and expand the LMPC's place in the market. He was in that way integral to the company's attempts to build brand recognition and other aspects of relationship between the public and the product. Intellectual firepower was also needed. The LMPC's most notable effort to recruit new creative talent into the fold, and their first serious sally into building a stable of directorial talent, was well aimed. In the Spring of 1918 George came across a novel entitled *The Homesteader* by the Negro author Oscar Micheaux and, though he had not fully absorbed the book, he immediately recognized the story as one which reflected the westward bound vision which made up so much of his own family's experiences and which buoyed so much of the LMPC's narrative thrust.[287] Micheaux, a man of the Plains, was headquartered in Sioux City, Iowa at the time and had begun to make a name for himself as a novelist by taking his story of a black man building a life in the nation's great open spaces door to door so as to sell it to the area's whites. The idea of a black man in an almost wholly white realm convincing whites to deal with him, to show interest in his story, likely led George to see Micheaux as a kindred spirit. He sent the novel to Noble who also quickly saw himself, his own life and times, in much of the tale and therefore also had a fast interest pursuing movie rights for the book.[288] George sent Micheaux a letter and the writer shortly thereafter paid the postal worker a visit which lasted two days as the pair excitedly tested their ideas of a collaboration which might bring *The Homesteader* to the screen under the

[287] Patrick McGilligan, *Oscar Micheaux: The Great and Only* (New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 2007) p.113.
[288] Ibid., p.114.

Lincoln marquee.[289] Though the marriage of these two storytelling concerns strikes as a natural match the partnership was not so easy to consummate. The bare course of events connected with the Lincoln courtship of Micheaux, along with some of the particulars, is now well known in the literature given the vogue that Micheaux has gone through over the last fifteen years or so. Still, attention must be paid to the details of those negotiations if we are to obtain a full grasp of the extensive efforts the LMPC put into growing their footprint in the race film industry.[290]

The parties dickered back and forth for a couple of months before it seems that the appetite of coalition faded. Micheaux knew little about the film industry when the sides first met, but he was a seasoned dealmaker and had a sophisticated grasp of protecting his position in any given agreement. The more he researched the proposition of having the LMPC bring his novel to the screen the more he filigreed his ideas about how the deal would be structured and he at he same time began to see film-making as an extension of his fortes, writing and wrestling a favorable accord for himself from whomever with he was dealing. Micheaux's correspondence of June 3, 1918, aggressively asserted that screen scenarios taken from popular novels were the best way to tackle the problem of source

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[289] Ibid., p.118.

[290] McGilligan's inviting biography was preceded by a slew of monographs including: Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence, *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000); J. Ronald Green, *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000); Jane Gaines, *Fire and Desire: Mixed Race Movies in the Silent Era* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2001), which was not about Micheaux, per se, but nonetheless centered her study around his films; Gaines, Bowser, Charles Musser, Eds., *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African Filmmaking and Race Cinema in the Silent Era* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, Annotated Ed., 2001); Green, *With a Crooked Stick: The Films of Oscar Micheaux* (Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 2004).

material for films and, in addition to repeating an earlier demand that a film adaptation of his novel be six to eight reels in length, at least twice the duration of any Lincoln title to that point, he suggested that he was interested in appearing on screen as one of the main antagonists while also assisting 'in general with the direction of the picture.'[291] By June 9 Micheaux expressed plans to send his wife to her family for an 'extended visit' so that he could move to Omaha to woodshed with George regarding the picture.[292] Micheaux continued to state as late as a June 25 letter that he was averse to being involved in the money end of producing a film of his novel and he therefore offered the Lincoln group film and book rights if the fine points, which were becoming increasingly byzantine, could be shaken out.[293]

The Lincoln team had drawn up papers for the deal but, given his lack of experience in film, they were flabbergasted at the sea changes in Micheaux' positions.[294] Further, George, who was the only member of the LMPC to have had face-to-face dealings with Micheaux, found him to be a 'talker,' which is to say someone whose words aroused interest but could not be counted upon to represent a reliable, assailable position, a character trait of which George was particularly wary.[295] Johnson responded on June 26 with a letter that stated the novelist's ideas about the deal had transformed so profoundly that the whole arrangement would have to be vetted again by the Los Angeles office.[296] The deal did not survive that reassessment and George explained that Micheaux' desire to be closely

[291] Letter from Oscar Micheaux to George Johnson, 6/3/1918, Reel 9, GPJ Collection.
[292] Letter from Oscar Micheaux to George Johnson, 6/9/1918, GPJ Collection.
[293] Letter from Oscar Micheaux to George Johnson, 6/25/1918, GPJ Collection.
[294] 'Oscar Micheaux,' GPJ Collection.
[295] Ibid.
[296] Letter from George Johnson to Oscar Micheaux, 6/26/1918, GPJ Collection.

involved in the production despite having no experience was the primary sticking point.[297] While such concerns were unquestionably true, there was more to the dissolution of their negotiations. For instance, George's distrust of Micheaux as a smooth, manipulative operator walked in tandem with his brother's concern over Micheaux's readiness to use interracial relations in *The Homesteader* as a cheap, scandalous draw. Noble was of a mind to be careful not to stir opposition to the film's exhibition in the South and therefore wanted to make sure to treat the issue with all due 'study, tact, and a close understanding of the situation.'[298] Micheaux, on the other hand, brayed that he had sold the novel to men who worked for the Metro and Triangle film concerns, large Hollywood organizations, and each saw the plot twist of a 'white girl who in the end turns out to be colored was the cleverest thing that could have been done' and 'assures the success of the picture.'[299] The LMPC would eventually screen a story with just such turns of interracial event in their final film, *By Right of Birth*, the scenario of which would be penned by George. It appears that, though the Johnsons were amenable to including such controversial subject matter in their films, they had serious reservations about the 'tact' with which Micheaux would manage such an issue. George also balked at the book deal which required that Lincoln buy the books only from Micheaux and that the rights would flow from sales of 'all the books that may be demanded from the advertising the picture gives.'[300] Johnson noted that such would not be profitable after expenses were properly tabulated and that, at any rate, it would be difficult to get a bead on whether or not the book sales stemmed from the film's

[297] 'Oscar Micheaux,' GPJ Collection.
[298] McGilligan, *Oscar Micheaux*, p.114.
[299] Letter from Oscar Micheaux to George Johnson, 6/25/1918, GPJ Collection.
[300] Ibid.

advertising, a slipperiness that George likely saw as flowing from Micheaux' business approach.[301]

For his part, Oscar Micheaux, who had made it known that he had 'always courted an interest in the Picture business,' seems to have seen the Lincoln Motion Picture Company as a source of good information regarding certain details of the film industry which was nonetheless unable to really offer him something he could not readily manifest for himself. The flatlander insisted that he maintain film and book rights for the whites in the Midwest and Plains states with which he was familiar, a point which suggests that he was, at least initially, particularly focused on repeating in the film business the success he had in selling his book to whites, a strategy about which the Lincoln Company was not nearly so adamant. The author come scenarist was bursting with ideas and by the end of Summer 1918 the interest he had expressed in on-set involvement with the production of *The Homesteader* had fully taken over his view of the situation. An August 11, 1918 letter to Clarence Brooks arrived on new letterhead which read 'Micheaux Book & Film Company,' with himself as President and no other officers listed.[302] He announced that he had already raised $5,000 in subscriptions and would shortly double that amount in preparation for the onset of the first production. Micheaux would state that the LMPC dropped interest in his book because Noble was unable to spare room on his schedule as he usually made Lincoln films 'between times' and Micheaux' intended production of six to eight reels was

[301] Letter from George Johnson to Oscar Micheaux, 6/26/1918, GPJ Collection.
[302] Letter from Oscar Micheaux to Clarence Brooks, 8/11/1918, GPJ Collection.

going to need continuous attention for more than a month.[303] Micheaux's narrative pointed westward, but his business plan turned him eastward, from Sioux City to Chicago, where he would ground his new offices, and then to New York, where he felt he could round up the necessary thespians for his new endeavor. Notwithstanding Noble's valuable, if limited, cache of name brand appeal, Micheaux correctly ascertained 'the Negro race contained other talent.'[304]

The Lincoln group had sought to enhance their pool of creative power and had instead helped to push Oscar Micheaux, their first and most capable target, into competing with their business. Moreover, Micheaux did not simply move on from toying with the idea of having the senior race film venture produce his cherished novel, *he* immediately began working on poaching the Lincoln talent. Not only did he briefly continue to pursue Noble as a possible lead for his first film, but he also quickly took up a thread of communications with George aimed at bringing the youngest Johnson brother onto the new Micheaux Company roster.[305] Noble was too entangled with his Universal work to make time for the newcomer's initial explorations into being a film producer and, as noted above, would soon cease appearing in Lincoln titles, as well. However, George was willing to listen and Micheaux started by offering an assistant secretary position without any definite rate of pay and the foggy job description of doing 'something in connection with the success of the

[303] Letter from Oscar Micheaux, unaddressed and undated, though likely to George Johnson, GPJ Collection.
[304] Ibid.
[305] Letter from Oscar Micheaux to Clarence Brooks, 8/11/1918; Letter from Oscar Micheaux, unaddressed and undated, though likely to George GPJ Collection.

picture.'[306] A May 5, 1919 letter offered the General Manager slot and a salary of $50 per month and the promise of a raise if business grew according to plan.[307] A March 30, 1920 telegram from Micheaux raised the ante to $1,800 annually with unspecified perks.[308] It does not appear that George ever gave serious consideration to leaving the Lincoln Company and he continued to work assiduously for that group's success. George declined the offer of $1,800, first stating that, as of the Spring of 1920, he was under a 6 month contract with the LMPC, and then noting that his secured salary with the post office came in at about $2,000 annually which, when joined with the $50 to $100 a month he cleared with the LMPC, made it a losing proposition to accept a slot with Micheaux.[309] Even a revised September 24, 1920 offer of $2,000 annually with a tentative promise of an increase to $3,000 for the following year could not move George from his Lincoln roost.[310]

For his part, Johnson continued to closely watch Micheaux's progress lest any weakness create a situation wherein he might be able to indulge his abiding interest in swallowing up the writer-turned-director and his production outfit. In a March 31, 1920 letter George openly admitted that, as he felt he had been singularly instrumental in turning Micheaux toward filmmaking, he had maintained close observances of the novelist's exploits and was aware of many of the details of the operating expenses and

[306] Letter from Oscar Micheaux, unaddressed and undated, though likely to George Johnson, GPJ Collection.
[307] Letter from Oscar Micheaux to George Johnson, 5/5/1919, GPJ Collection.
[308] Telegram from Oscar Micheaux to George Johnson, 3/30/1920, GPJ Collection.
[309] 3/31/1920 and 9/22/1920 letters from George Johnson to Oscar Micheaux, GPJ Collection.
[310] Letter from Swan Micheaux to George Johnson, 9/24/1920, GPJ Collection.

meager net results that the Micheaux Book & Film Company had managed.[311] George tried to get Micheaux to imagine the dependable financial successes that would result from the latter joining the Lincoln brand and its many connections in the film industry. That vision of solid growth was contrasted to Micheaux's need to finance his newest title, *The Brute*, by establishing a new venture, the Micheaux Film Company, the suggestion being that the difficulties of the race film game had already forced Micheaux to begin playing questionable corporate shell games.[312] George had culled at least some of his information about Micheaux' affairs via amateurish espionage that included creating a dummy brokerage, R.R. Dale & Co., which requested and received Micheaux stockholder information by way of due diligence requests kited on doctored-up letterhead, and spy eyes on the ground in the persons of Ira McGowan, George's brother-in-law, and James Goins, a close friend. McGowan and Goins would provide valuable labor for Micheaux, including booking duties, while also funneling information back to George. News of various productions and a warning against accepting one of Micheaux' offers of employment were typical of such correspondences from Goins, who found the oily-tongued Micheaux to be a person of 'unbusinesslike methods' and someone he could not tolerate.[313] Though these communiqués from inside the Micheaux camp were kept clandestine enough that Goins at one point closed his missive hurriedly for fear the letter would be seen, no advantage was gained and it was not long before it became clear to

[311] Letter from George Johnson to Oscar Micheaux, 3/31/1920, GPJ Collection.
[312] Ibid.
[313] Telegram from James Goins to George Johnson, no legible date, noting 'cannot stand him longer resigning this week,' GPJ Collection.

Johnson that Micheaux would not be sunk any time soon.[314] Johnson responded by accepting limited Omaha area booking and publicity duties for Micheaux films.

The first film he was to handle, *Within Our Gates*, immediately brought to light the differences in the visions each camp had regarding the ways race dramas could be used for profit as the film ran into censorship problems stemming from the narrative's blunt depictions of a lynching. The film had initially been destined for complete rejection in Chicago and Goins had correctly presaged 'this picture is going to have a hard time of it' after wending past censors only due to pressure from local aldermen.[315] As in Chicago, where the race riots from the Summer of 1919 were still fresh traumas in the minds of censors and certain factions of the race leadership, there were ugly memories from that time swirling around Omaha regarding the horrific murder and incineration of Will Brown, a young black man accused of having assaulted a white woman.[316] George had not seen the lynching, though it occurred on a corner across the street from the post office where he worked, and he considered any inflammation of emotions surrounding the incident noxious to profits.[317] Micheaux' tendency to court ire and scandal, often to sop up publicity, ran against the grain of George's desire to avoid any kind of friction in an already limited field of exhibition possibilities. He explained in a letter to Swan Micheaux, Oscar's brother, that audience members had walked out of the first Omaha showing of *Gates*

[314] Letter from James Goins to George Johnson, 12/30/1919, GPJ Collection.
[315] Letter from James Goins, 12/30/1919, Reel 7, GPJ Collection.
[316] 'A Horrible Lynching,' *Racial Tensions in Omaha*, Nebraska Studies.Org, 1900-1924, http://www.nebraskastudies.org/0700/frameset_reset.html?http://www.nebraskastudies.org/0700/stories/0701_0134.html.
[317] George P. Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' Oral History Program of University of California at Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California, The Regents of the University of California, 1970, p. 15.

because not enough had been cut from the second reel's lynching scene. Johnson addressed the film's dismal returns in Nebraska and could only think that the blame sat with those images of extrajudicial cruelty as 'the Public does not like the Race propaganda regarding lynching, especially here, as it is too realistic of what happened here in the city last year.'[318] Micheaux acknowledged that such material was considered troubling to most, but the daring and headstrong young director replied that he preferred 'a strong story at all times, since I believe that every story should leave an impression.'[319]

Jane Gaines has suggested in *Fire and Desire*, that George's reticence about *Within our Gates* was quite possibly part of the black middle class' wont to downplay lynching, the subtext seeming to be that there was a need in well-to-do black circles to avoid wallowing in the worst that race relations had to offer while also avoiding conflicts with the white establishment from whom they sought acceptance.[320] This perspective seems to assume that attempting to improve the public image of black America by way of trying to demonstrate that blacks were in many ways like whites was a capitulation of sorts. However, even Gaines found a preponderance of concern for profits in Johnson's motives as she pointed to a correspondence between George and the *Pittsburgh Courier's* Robert L. Vann which reported that showings of *Within Our Gates* had been cancelled in Louisiana and that a Kansas theater owner had demanded that the $230 in rental fees be returned.[321] Gaines understandably found Johnson's cautious, deferential approach to the censors and

[318] George Johnson letter to Micheaux, 8/13/1920, GPJ Collection.
[319] McGilligan, *Oscar Micheaux*, p.141.
[320] Jane Gaines, *Fire and Desire: Mixed Race Movies in the Silent Era*, Chicago, Illinois, University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 241, 242
[321] Ibid.

the prospective audiences to constitute a failure to champion the film rooted in accommodationist sidestepping. However, George's position cannot be so easily categorized. Just as it is certainly too simplistic to consider the presentation of mob violence in *Gates* as either a bold, militant swipe at racist savagery or an opportunistic instance of Micheaux' stated belief in profits from lurid cinematic spectacle, George's position was multi-faceted. It should firstly be noted that he handled the advertisements in the Nebraska area and a story ran in the local paper before the first showing of Gates noted that highly charged mob scenes were involved and that 'people interested in the welfare of the Race cannot afford to mind seeing this great production' which 'has not minced words in presenting the facts as they really exist.'[322] George almost certainly did not write the piece, but he willingly disseminated the message and awaited the response even as he requested that portions of the lynch scene be reduced. This suggests that finding the best way to maximize revenue was the chief concern rather a simple worry about upsetting tastes or mainstream complacencies. Additionally, it should be noted that, on the date of the Will Brown lynching, word had come that the bloodthirsty Omaha mob was going to descend upon the black part of town after having burned the unfortunate young Negro alive. George sent his wife and child to a safe area before arming himself and joining other men from the community in setting up defensive positions in preparation for an assault that thankfully did not come.[323] Confrontation, even a militant response, was not foreign to George. However, if advancement by way of commerce was the goal, short-

[322] 'Race Problem Play Comes to Omaha,' GPJ Collection, Reel 9.
[323] George P. Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 15.

circuiting the process by entangling the apparatus in turmoil that stood to obscure the film from profits was to be avoided.

The Johnson and Micheaux dance of offers, counter-offers, and attempts to infiltrate or poach from one another never bore the fruit of creative collaboration and neither firm was strong enough to absorb the other. The distribution schemes and limited markets with which the LMPC and the Micheaux companies were forced to deal were not capable of producing revenue that would allow the kinds of cannibalism that helped to create the massive production studios or the vertical agglomerations which made Hollywood such a fast-rising industry churning through hundreds of millions of dollars. The two production companies were essentially independents who had no overarching industry to partner with and therefore were primarily stuck in outmoded, highly marginal distribution methods that were either continuations of the state's rights ploys abandoned by Hollywood years earlier or extremely limited specialty road shows. The result was a lack of the economic clout necessary to grow the respective companies by way of taking on another firm. Indeed, as noted above, the firms and the overall industry they were so central to bringing into existence were always flirting with the brink and could not demonstrate enough stability to lure meaningful cooperation.

Jane Gaines has accurately noted that George's writings of Micheaux show he was of two minds regarding his contemporary as he tended to both acknowledge Micheaux' importance as a film-maker and business man while also being extremely wary of his

business methods and nearly celebratory of Micheaux' failures.[324] Johnson's expressed belief that success as a film-maker flowed from a knowledge of how the film industry worked, along with the maintenance of connections within both the race and Hollywood industries, led him to believe that Micheaux would struggle and founder as a production concern lacking those very prerequisites. George did not initially grasp or accept that Micheaux was a master on the margins of the central-most dynamic of film production, namely, keeping the ball in the air by raising money for one project even while still in production or post-production on another. Charlene Regester has tracked Micheaux' securing of the rights to Charles Chesnutt's first novel, *The House Behind the Cedars*, a pot boiler which gouged at the contact points between passing and class infiltration, and noted the filmmaker's various ploys to keep his production schedule relatively full without necessarily having the upfront capital to do so.[325] Micheaux made serial offers buffered by periods of silence and carefully timed delay tactics to keep Chesnutt and his publisher, Houghton Mifflin & Co., on the string without depleting his company's impoverished production funds and, in so doing, kept the schedule afloat when other companies managed only one film or, as in the case of the LMPC, faltered after a run of titles which started strong and then thinned in frequency before expiring altogether.

George would have especially chafed at Micheaux' failure to make timely payments for the rights to the story.[326] Micheaux ended up paying off Chesnutt, though more than a year

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[324] Jane Gaines, *Fire and Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era*, Chicago, Illinois, University of Chicago Press, 2001, p.120.
[325] Charlene Regester, 'Oscar Micheaux the Entrepreneur: Financing the House Behind the Cedars,' *Journal of Film and Video*, Vol. 49, No. 1-2 (Spring 1997), pp.17-27.
[326] Ibid.

late, and he made his film, some would say the most important end point in the filmmaking game. Get the movie in the can. Without being so facile as to state that George Johnson was too prudish to be creative with his financing, he was not as 'creative' as Micheaux was and he struggled to get the financing to materialize. Micheaux would go on to fall prey to the funding issues we have here discussed and bankruptcy would find him in 1928. Johnson, always fussing over dollar signs and the intricacies of balancing funds, dutifully noted that at that low point the Micheaux Film Corp. had assets of $1,400 and liabilities of $7,837.[327] George did not mention in that entry, however, that Micheaux would rise as the phoenix from those ashes and that he would do so while also cresting the transition from silent films to talkies, though not immediately. Indeed, Micheaux would go on to make films for a quarter century after the doors closed on the LMPC. The 'talker' continued on in large part because he was a gifted dealmaker who continually found ways to raise the money necessary to make films. Micheaux' willingness to be sly and quick with the bounds of upstanding business practices, which is to say unencumbered by the need to at all times seem in concert with the professed values of the so-called white business world, played and important role in his survival as a race businessman.

George Johnson's tendency to volunteer judgmental comments about the business practices and failings of partners and competitors alike gives his voice a priggish sharpness which was especially notable where concerns about honesty and reliability were concerned. As a person who began early on to collect and collate articles and odd bits of information regarding blacks in cinema his asides carry the self-aware overtone of a

[327] 'Oscar Micheaux,' GPJ Collection.

perspective that was preparing a time capsule for future generations who might be expected to be both more open to considering the value of the contributions being made by the African Americans he chronicled and equally prone to being oblivious to their existence. George Johnson was making a case and the race's chance to be recognized for all of its most positive possibilities was on the line. Uplift ideology's desire to promote hygiene and modesty in the personal sphere had as a corollary in the business world an urgency for clean dealings and probative business practices that would communicate the readiness of the race's cream for commercial enterprise. Without forgetting George's spy games and dummy documents, his allergic response to that which was 'unclean' or below board in business does bear some of that conflation between morality and class which was steeped in white supremacist dogma. In other words, George and many like him exhibited a concern for honesty that seemed to suggest they believed living up to the professed values of the mainstream business world, read the white business world, would get them ahead, perhaps by making them appear more trustworthy and therefore desirable as business partners. This was a limiting position to take and Micheaux' willingness to speak a business language less pinioned by such strictures may have done well by his plans to be a filmmaker. When we stop to consider that Micheaux raised money from whites and tried to keep pace with mainstream filmmaking it becomes clear that, while George may have felt the 'clean' approach was more likely to attract 'white money,' Micheaux' methods were not simply 'black business' in any substantive way.

Financing With Government Funding: The Attempt to Profit Through Citizenship

George began the battle for operating funds by trying to book with various high-profile Negro organizations such as the National Negro Business League in hopes of showing the Lincoln titles to well-off African Americas with surplus cash, race awareness, and a likely sympathy for their product's uplift sensibilities. They contact Maggie Lena Walker and the Right Worthy Grand Council of the Independent Order of St. Luke in Richmond, Virginia, about showing the titles at a convention that body was holding in August of 1917, but the program was booked. George was politely referred to a local theater.[328] George also called for the Negro banks of the country to step up their guarded and indecisive interest in the race's film industry so as to infuse proper financing and rationalized business planning into black productions the way that mainstream banks had with Hollywood. Financing was the key to a stabilized production schedule for quality, clean films that would then make exploitation of the expanding base of Negro-oriented theaters a source of consistent profits. The lack of assets which marked the LMPC's efforts from the beginning constituted another problem where raising the necessary operating cash was concerned. The Hollywood firms had built studios that, not unlike more traditional manufacturing concerns, were located on real estate owned by the company and relied on equipment and materials that were on hand. These assets allowed any lending institution to more easily gauge the likelihood for successful industrial film production and also provided some basis for assessing what kind of collateral was available to secure the provider's investment. The LMPC had not studio or real estate and

[328] Letter from Maggie Lena Walker to George Johnson, 8/6/1917, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

could claim only limited assets, so their profile was less pronounced and lenders had much more difficulty in gauging the company's likelihood for long-term success. George suggested that, aside from outright investment expenditures from banks, finance could best pursue this via trust instruments. This would allow black production companies such as the LMPC to reap profits from the amusement market proportionate to the population.

The idea of getting monies proportionate to the population of blacks in the United States was also at play as the Lincoln Motion Picture Company tried to get money for productions by attempting to access the revenue stream being created by the government's expenditures for the nation's involvement in World War I. Harry Gant attended a film industry meeting wherein it was rumored that the Federal Government had plans to produce propaganda films and that as much as $7 million was being allocated for that purpose.[329] The Lincoln men reasoned that, as the fighting troops were ten percent Negro, ten percent of the allocations would rightly go to the nation's largest, most able productions companies owned by Negroes.[330] The ability of a bureaucratic organ to funnel large amounts of capital to a project was shown in Chapter 1 to have assisted the eldest Johnson brother, Virgel, in his efforts to establish a contracting business in Arkansas. George intended to follow that strategy. Careful to note that the officers of the company were all supportive of the war effort and, where appropriate, registered for the draft and at the ready, the LMPC was going to attempt to further their business interests and the provision of entertainment to the race by prodding the government to direct funds to the company as a matter of right following from the race's participation in the onerous duties

[329] Notes from Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[330] Notes from Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

of citizenship that arise during war time. Max Weber has noted that 'Bureaucratic rationalism can also be, and often has been, a revolutionary force of the first order in its relation to tradition' as it is a force that transforms the circumstances in which people act and can thereby sometimes improve 'their chances of adapting to the external world by rational determination of means and ends.'[331] The Lincoln hope was that the democratic principles of the nation would be more rationally and fairly followed by a government body, an appeal to a source of authority which, in its required adherence to those founding principles, would be more likely to apply them according to the humanity of African Americans, which was, ultimately, at the core of the demands for recognition by the government.[332]

George was sent to Washington to take a meeting with Emmett J. Scott, a Tuskegee man acting as a Secretary of War Special Adjutant regarding Negro affairs. George took some vacation time from the post office in Omaha and headed to the Nation's capital in hopes of getting Scott to assist the LMPC in getting in line for any money set to be spent on films connected with the Negro at war. The postal clerk found Scott to be protected by a phalanx of secretaries, assistants, and stenographers and had no initial luck in getting an appointment. However, he happened to run into another Tuskegee man with whom he had prior dealings, Ernest T. Atwell, then representing Negro interests with the U.S. Food Administration. Atwell stepped in and arranged a pass that allowed George to meet with

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[331] Max Weber, 'The Nature of Charismatic Domination,' excerpted in Sean Redmond and Su Holmes, (eds.), *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader* (London, United: Sage Publications Ltd., 2007), p. 18.

[332] Letter from George Johnson to the Committee of Public Information, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

Scott. During the sit-down George presented pictures, letters, and other ephemera in order to construct an argument in favor of the LMPC getting in on any clot of propaganda money. Scott, who had been in attendance at a Tuskegee showing of the Lincoln films and recalled the positive response given by the audience, stated that he was unaware of any such allocation and that, even if the there were to be such an allocation, he was acting strictly as a 'Judge Advocate' and would have no ability to promote any position until the issue was brought to him by the government.[333] Scott also was of the opinion that the Lincoln actors were not skilled enough to adequately carry such a project. George countered by offering to work out a deal with his friend Robert Levy, the Jewish head of the Lafayette Players, a famed troupe of Negro actors. The plan was to have those respected talents work with the LMPC to produce a film of the highest quality. There was a hitch to this plan, namely George's need to return to his work schedule with the post office rather than extend his stay on the East coast so as to work out such a deal. George concocted a plan whereby Scott, using his official capacity with the government, would send a note to George's superiors in Omaha indicating that there was a need for George to remain away from work for a number of additional days. After pondering the ploy for a moment Scott composed the following note: 'Mr. Geo. P. Johnson of your office is being detained here in Wash. on some very important business.'[334] George left directly for Manhattan where he met with Levy who, based on George's information, was hot for the idea and left immediately with George for Washington D.C. The Lafayette director promised his complete support of the

[333] Notes from Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[334] Ibid.

Lincoln plan should the allocation pan out. The three shook hands and went their separate ways in wait of any definite sign of the government's decision.[335]

Scott got back to George about six months later with notice that he could find no indication of a multi-million dollar allotment for wartime propaganda pictorials. George also received a letter from the Committee of Public Information, Division of Films, which noted that their investigation of such an appropriation had turned up no allotment.[336]. The government *was* going to be involved in the production of propaganda films and there *was* a plan to include a reel on the participation of African-Americans in the war effort. However, rather than government money going to producers, the production houses were asked make the films and were then allowed to keep all profits derived from the film's exhibition.[337] Charles Hart, the Director of the Committee on Public Information's Division of Films, wrote George on August 8, 1918, and politely dismissed George's suggestion that a sub-committee handling Negro propaganda affairs be created. George had met with Levy again a couple of weeks later and the New York showman urged George to make it clear to the Committee on Public Information that the tools and people necessary for putting together narrative stories or travelling to France to shoot on location were at the ready. The stated position of the government was that the idea was sound and of 'unquestionable value' but could not be taken up because others similarly situated had made propositions along the same lines and to have accepted the offer of assistance from one group and not

[335] Ibid.
[336] Letter from Rufus Steele to George Johnson, 11/4/1918, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[337] Alan Axelrod, *Selling the Great War: The Making of American Propaganda* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) p. 152.

the other would have been 'embarrassing' for the state.[338] If George was frustrated by such a ridiculous response he did not include such a sentiment in his notes and writings. Perhaps he was inured to such flimsy excuse making and disregard.

Almost two months later another member of the Division of Films, Rufus Steele, wrote to George with notice that there were no plans for a race film production unit, though George's ideas were to be born in mind. Steele also noted that Emmett Scott had arranged for a one-reel picture called *Colored Americans* to be made by C.L. Chester of Outing Chester Pictures, one of ten such subjects Chester had been contracted to produce for the government's *America Aroused* series.[339] Written coverage of the film suggested that the overall content of the picture gave audiences a chance 'to see the strange and splendid things that the 12,000,000 colored Americans have done for the cause for liberty' as the war was presented as having 'transformed the American negro into the negro American,' a person or group whose 'citizenship has become a living reality.'[340] Chester's film likely more or less followed a script by Steele, who was heading up the Film Division's Scenario Department.

The choice of C.L. Chester demonstrates that concerns of having blacks involved in the production of propaganda for the black populace was not at that time a consideration of any consequence to the government. Chester was an early producer of nature and travelogue films under the serial moniker of 'Outings with Chester' and had thereby gained

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[338] Letter from Charles Hart to George Johnson, 8/8/1918, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[339] Letter from Rufus Steel to George Johnson, 9/26/1918, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[340] 'The Negro American in the War,' *Leslie's Photographic Review of the Great War: 1920 Edition*, found at http://oldmagazinearticles.com/WW1_African-American_Experience_during_World_War_One_pdf.

a good deal of experience as a documentarian. During the year prior to being awarded the contract for the CPI's Negro pictorial he had also achieved some notice with a series of films featuring a chimp whose on-screen presentation was comically like that of a person the primate had been dubbed 'Snooky the Humanzee.' Chester started in the film industry by producing pictures for a submarine production company that took him around the globe collecting images of foreign lands and outlandish creatures. Some of his early titles included a short attending to birdlife in Louisiana which was entitled 'Pinfeather Pickaninnies' which apparently sought to put the audience in an amiable, humorous mood by leaning on the popular image of harmless, prat-falling Negro children.[341] Thus the presentation of 'colored Americans' was to be associated with artless travelogues purporting to chase after the question of man's evolutionary ascent from apes and comedies starring a chain-smoking chimpanzee in overalls who babysat, shined shoes, and played checkers with a dog.[342] The Lincoln project of exploring black participation in the American experiment was spurned in favor of a company whose product either ignored

[341] Chester titles can be found under his name on the Internet Move Database, http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0156311/.

[342] The travelogue description is taken in part from a viewing of the Chester short *Monkeyland*, which can be viewed on line at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zw2MbZr-qEc. Part of the description of the content of *Snooky* films comes from a brief review by Mike Gebert, a Site Administrator at nitrateville.com, who in the 9/27/2010 thread 'Snooky Meets the Tsar: Cinesation 2010 Report,' noted that the chimp's character undertook a number of jobs in *Snooky's Labor Lost* which were all generally associated with minorities (shoe shine, a Chinese Laundromat, etc.), http://www.nitrateville.com/viewtopic.php?t=7264. Also referenced was the Snooky short *His Best Friend*, which can be viewed online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6Z0sTxU-SI. While that location indicates that the film was from 1925 there is no other record of C.L Chester making films after 1922.

people of color, including black Americans, or suggested that 'colored Americans' were, if not somehow related to Chester's anthropomorphized Snooky, exotic others.[343]

It is, of course, impossible to state for certain how any footage produced by the Lincoln company would have diverged from the Chester footage and it does not appear that any great profit was to have come from making the piece. The evidence indicates that the company nonetheless wanted to pursue a role in providing a depiction of blacks at war for both commercial and prestige reasons. The aforementioned write-up of *Colored Americans* with its reference to black difference as exoticized oddity, well meaning as it may have been, does not raise confidence that Chester handled the film with the same care as the LMPC would have. Further, while there is no evidence that George Johnson and the Lincoln people were at all aware of Chester's other filmic output, and while it is likely that he was given the CPI contract primarily because of his experience as a documentarian, George's idea that representatives from the Negro population should receive a fair share of the funding *and* an opportunity to give voice to their community was a profoundly democratic position that those safe-guarding and wielding the collective power of Democracy did not embrace. Once again, the LMPC was in some important ways an actor out of season, ahead of its time and yet laying the groundwork for a different environment.

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[343] Chester spoke of Snooky in terms that reflected the age's reliance on cursory understandings of evolution which all too often lent a scientific patina to racist fare. Connecting apes to blacks was not unknown, etc., and Chester explicitly described his simian co-star in terms that connected animal's alleged knack for human understanding and behavior in terms that equated Snooky's lineage with the assumptions of biologically inherited traits of quality and capability usually attributed to humanity. For instance, Chester took special care to note that, unlike animals, Snooky never stole, *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*, 10/3/1920.

George was still interested in having a film to release regarding the participation of American Negro soldiers. To satisfy this desire he obtained from the French Pictorial Service the rights to a newsreel about Negro troops fighting on the front in France. The deal with CPI had dragged so long that, by the time George requested the footage the French Pictorial Service had nothing for him and suggested a special order would have to be made which required a wait of almost a month.[344] George accepted the wait, noting only one print could be managed during the experimental stage, but adding that the LMPC would be very interested in a steady stream of footage if such turned out to be possible. The film was obtained for ten cents a foot and, though George was the first to get those rights, he was not able to arrange exclusive access to the footage. George apparently initially requested that footage of both French and American soldiers of color be provided, apparently to provide the audience with further edification via an international, diasporic thrust to the footage.[345] The prestige value of the films was probably as marginal as the profit potential by the time the LMPC was able to get the print out on the road. Though the Pictorial Service let it be known that they had expected the LMPC to order at least four prints and were waiting for an order to come for the balance, there is no record that the full compliment of prints were ordered.[346] Regardless, the company's attempt to access a stream of revenue via providing services and product to the Federal Government, while ultimately fruitless, provides an example of black business demonstrating assumptions of

[344] Letter from the French Pictorial Service to George Johnson, 6/26/1918, Microfilm, French Pictorial Service, p.50a, Reel 5.
[345] Letter from the French Pictorial Service to George Johnson, 6/6/1918, Microfilm, French Pictorial Service , p.49, Reel 5.
[346] Letter from French Pictorial Service to George Johnson, 9/7/1918, GPJ Collection.

belonging and of the right to access as Americans without ambivalence about their place in doing so.

Financing Through Reorganization

Adolf Zukor, the head of one of early Hollywood's more successful productions houses, Famous Players-Lasky, commissioned a study of the industry in the timeframe of 1919 and came away with the belief that, because most of the earnings were then being enjoyed at the exhibition end of the business, his company, which had already succeeded in a hostile take over of William Hodkinson's Paramount distribution company, needed also to complete verticality by bringing the more profitable theaters under the company's umbrella.[347] Zukor would begin buying up theaters by the dozens until, in 1921, the company he controlled owned roughly 300 exhibition houses.[348] Some theater chains, such as those owned by William Fox, began taking control of distribution by purchasing film exchange groups and production companies.[349] This trend toward verticality created a situation wherein those that could marry the three major links of the industry under one roof became enormously powerful and were able to essentially establish a realm of film-making that continuously evolved while relegating those that could not so integrate to an effectively separate sphere of business which had few of the major film world's potentialities for profit. When it is considered that the Lincoln Motion Picture Company could not hope to purchase any profitable theater and controlled a distribution arm that,

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[347] Janet Wasko, *Movies and Money: Financing the American Film Industry* (Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1982) pp. 18-19.
[348] Victor J. Tremblay and Carol H. Tremblay, eds., *Industry and Firm Studies, 4th Ed.* (Armonk, New York, 2007), p. 186.
[349] Ibid.

handling only the occasional film produced by another company, was only nominally profitable in its own right, the fact that their most expensive and promoted film, *By Right of Birth*, cost about one-third as much to make as did the low-end average cost of a Hollywood negative, it becomes clear that, as a business venture existing in a particular industry, a particular set of relationships and mechanisms producing commercial profit, the LMPC was a weak man struggling to keep head above water in a strong current.[350] While it is possible to make a movie 'on the cheap' and to have it produce tremendous profits, access to the movie houses was necessary, an arrangement that was becoming more, not less, unstable for the LMPC.

Without access to the distribution schemes which put money into production, and with dwindling, rather than expanding exhibition options, and facing competition from the larger concerns who could undercut their pricing while presenting a technically superior product, the Lincoln team was by 1921 rapidly being outflanked and buried by the money logics of their chosen business. In 1915, just before the LMPC became an idea that Noble Johnson and Harry Gant would pursue, the film industry was still trying to establish itself as a stable, reliable industry that could draw the respect, interest, and money of big finance operations. Independent production companies, like the Universal company for whom Gant and Noble worked at their start in Hollywood, were generally not considered good bets for investment money flowing from large financial institutions, though some exceptions existed, such as D.W. Griffith's Wark Productions Company, which boasted Wall

[350] In 1921 the average cost of a Hollywood production negative in 1920 was between $25,000 and $100,000, Wasko, *Movies and Money*, 21.

Street participants who were invested after the phenomenal success of *Birth of a Nation*.[351] However, in 1919, right about the time Zukor's study was establishing in his mind the need for vertical integration, Famous Players-Lasky and its distribution segment, Paramount, received a major infusion of operating cash from a large investment operation, Kuhn, Loeb, and Co., which both demonstrated that the industry was mature and about to begin a substantial spasm of integrations and mergers that would leave the race film industry even further on the margins.[352] The lack of financial backing from investment firms, rather than small-time lenders making sustenance-level loans, meant that staying in business as a race firm after 1919 was a difficult endeavor that could be accomplished only with a tremendous amount of energy spent manning the older methods of distribution and, more importantly, only by individuals who could put deals together consistently in spite of marginal returns and little in the way of a blueprint for stabilizing profitability.

In 1919 the company was only able to produce a Lincoln News Pictorial, a news reel that focused on black luminaries and supporters of the day such as Kelly Miller, the Howard University mathematician, Roscoe Conkling Simmons, a black journalist and orator of great renown, and the Reverend Washington Gladden, white, a proponent of the

[351] Ibid., 10.; In re D.W. Griffith's involvements with banks, see Janet Wasko, 'D.W. Griffith and the Banks: A Case Study in Film Financing,' from Paul Kerr, (ed.), *The Hollywood Film Industry* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986). pp. 31-42.
[352] Ibid., 20, 21. For further information about the many combinations that occurred between production houses, distribution companies, and theater chains, see Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture 1915-1928*, New York, N.Y., Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1990, pp. 63-94.

social gospel and equal rights for African Americans.[353] The company was otherwise dormant while awaiting the return of the money that would be needed for further productions. Financing was precarious for most African American businesses, which meant that the freedom to partner and grow through risk was limited and often constrained to a single venture. George decided to make a concerted effort to reorganize the LMPC in order to attract some operating capital out of rich Negroes, their general interest in the race's uplift hopefully being enough to get them on board, and those whites with money who also had a demonstrated care for race films.[354] He tried to put together a deal with Robert L. Vann, editor of *The Pittsburgh Courier*, The Negro-owned Brown & Stevens banks of Philadelphia, Robert Church, Tennessee's richest black, Robert Brokenburr, attorney for the Madam Walker Corporation, Robert Levy, the Jewish head of Reol Pictures who also directed the Lafayette Players, E.T. Atwell, the financial secretary at the Tuskegee Institute, and the white operators of Chicago-based theaters which catered to Negroes, among others.[355]

George had already noted to Robert L. Vann that it was high time to think about once again trying to bring Micheaux on board, though his clarion word was that he had no interest in Micheaux' business as his films were not financially viable at that point, especially the bedeviled *Within Our Gates*.[356] George was instead covetous of the white money men that Micheaux had developed in Iowa and the Dakotas, men who George

[353] George Johnson, 'My Activity in Negro Motion Pictures,' Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[354] George Johnson, 'My Activity in Negro Motion Pictures,' Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[355] Ibid.; 'A Report of a Trip Made to Chicago Aug 27 to Sept 8 1918,' Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[356] Letter from George Johnson to Robert L. Vann, undated, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

believed 'could be used to great advantage.'[357] He also felt the film and book rights for Micheaux' two films, *The Homesteader* and *Within Our Gates*, could help bring in needed cash, though he felt the value of the latter film would have to be rehabilitated by expanding it into a proper feature, which would also almost certainly have meant removing the offensive lynching scene. George also felt that Micheaux as a creative force could be good for the LMPC's future if he would accept that he was not going to be able to make a go of it as a producer and was willing to be 'handled' by the Lincoln leadership.[358] Johnson hoped to work a deal where, at the very worst, the LMPC would grant Micheaux his vanity by leaving him in the position of President of the Micheaux Film Corporation while the Lincoln Motion Picture Company would control a sizable chunk of his stock, produce and release his films, and use his star, Evelyn Preer, who was also part of Levy's Lafayette Players.[359] This was a plan of action that George wished to follow under the LMPC flag or that of another company that might arise from reorganization. He wasn't being particular on that count.

George went to Chicago in late August 1918 into early September of 1918 to meet with Robert Levy about reorganization and the above-noted deal to produce films for the government. Levy indicated he was interested in helping to reorganize the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, an undertaking he felt would take $100,000 to finance, but wanted to know what the company could muster. George spoke without having the backing of the board or accurate information about their holdings. He stated that the company could

[357] Ibid.
[358] Ibid.
[359] Ibid.

come up with $25,000, but this was a guesswork response as he had not been able to get Noble or the other Lincoln officers behind a definite plan. Levy apparently read this and was not convinced, so reorganization through Levy was put on hold.

Robert Vann, the editor of The Pittsburgh Courier, was involved in attempts to raise money for a reorganization of the LMPC which began with a letter from George in December 1919 and proceeded through 1920.[360] Vann had noticed the company's dip from view after Noble's departure and had been involved in some dealings with George that led him to contact J.T. Smith, the Lincoln Company's president, with an offer to assist in reorganizing the film company so that it might operate on a cooperative basis with Vann's magazine, *The Competitor*. Vann, light-skinned with straight, neatly combed hair, was also an attorney. He felt the LMPC could 'lead them all' with proper promotion, funding, and some shifts in the organizational chart, though he also warned that, whether the Lincoln board was aware of the fact or not, 'the Jews are making ready an attack on the Negro field in movies.'[361] He noted he could handle much of the work himself and had reorganized *The Competitor* with a capitalization of $25,000.[362]

Smith responded on February 6, 1920, that the board had agreed and were wholly behind such a shift.[363] When Vann wrote back in April to note that his contacts were definitely behind him with regards to reorganizing the Lincoln venture, the news was not all good. His money men found the idea of involvement with the company a promising business venture worth putting some cash into, but they did not see how it made sense to

[360] Notes from George Johnson, undated, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[361] Letter from Robert L. Vann to J.T. Smith, 1/29/1920, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[362] Ibid.
[363] Letter from J.T. Smith, President of the LMPC, 2/6/1920, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

do so while also leaving in control the same board members who had been unable to avoid needing reorganization in the first place and who were not simply pouring more of their own bank into the fray. The money men in the East knew nothing of the movie men of the West save a few titles and, continued Vann, such was insufficient for the fulfillment of a request that amounted to begging for the money necessary to keep the LMPC a going concern.[364] Vann instead raised a proposition of his own, a million dollar company, $700,000 in common stock floated with the remaining $300,000 in preferred, non-voting paper. This meant that the Lincoln stock would have to be turned over and the new organization would subsume the LMPC while likely bringing the officers under the control of a board wherein they would be minority shareholders under the direction of Vann and a selection of wealthy blacks such as Robert Church, Jr., whose interest in the firm's well being ran hot and cold. $500 was all that Vann would ask for incorporating, a move that would allow him to put the stock on the market.[365]

Vann sent George a telegram on May 5, 1920, requesting a meeting in Chicago so as to have some face-to-face interactions on the deal.[366] The meeting took place on May 13. Church had planned to participate but his schedule took him away from Chicago just before the meeting date.[367] George presented Vann with the Lincoln board's plan for a reorganization under the general incorporating laws of the State of Delaware and Vann agreed to carry those actions out whenever told to do so. At that meeting Vann also

[364] Letter from Robert L. Vann to George Johnson, 4/16/1920, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[365] Ibid.
[366] Notes from George Johnson, undated, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[367] 'Statement for May 1920, Omaha Office, G.P. Johnson, Mg'r,' undated, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

brought up the possibility of arranging a Lincoln partnership with Harry Pace of the Pace and Handy songwriting team.[368] George had at that point been placed in control of almost 15,000 shares of Lincoln's 19,414 issued shares and, because he had an option period ending August 1, 1920, during which he had an open contract to seek reorganization, he attempted to negotiate a partnership with Harry Pace. The offer was for Pace to join George and Vann as a three-headed directorate of the LMPC for $5,000 with $2,000 being immediately used to liquidate the company's debt and the rest to be sunk into the next production. The directorate was to have absolute control over the company's operations and the reorganization would be accomplished with a capitalization of $50,000. Stocks would be released immediately via underwriting banks and an expected net gain for the new corporation of $37,500.[369] A week later George was clamoring for an answer, wanting to know if Vann was able to move forward with the Handy deal or the new Delaware corporation. The letter noted the Lincoln officers had refused any advance on working the deal, effectively forcing Vann and Johnson to work on the basis of a contingency fee. George again brought up Micheaux' situation and noted that the third film by Micheaux, *The Brute*, had been financed for the Micheaux Film Corporation, a separate entity from the Micheaux Book & Film Company that had carried the books for his first two features. George wrote to Vann in confidence and noted that his source informed him that the investors from the first two films had not been told of the production of *The Brute* or the establishment of the new company, so he foresaw Micheaux being set upon by investigations into the propriety of his dealings and a general malaise regarding his

[368] Ibid.
[369] Notes from George Johnson, undated, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

experiences as a film maker. Johnson felt that Micheaux' house of cards would become so wobbly that bringing him under the more sober control of the Lincoln company, or its successor, would be an easier make.[370]

Vann replied on July 21 in a letter that missed some of George's own desperate correspondences and the venerable editor indicated that he had been trying to raise funds among his contacts in New York but was unable to get any potential investors to really attend to the details of the possibilities at hand as they were all becoming more and more drawn into supporting Harding in the quickly-approaching 1920 election.[371] The offer to Pace had been delivered but Pace had no money he could spare for investment into the reorganization of the LMPC as he and Handy had sunk most of their surplus money into a different endeavor centered in New York. Vann still considered the deal too good to leave go so he proposed that the Lincoln board allow George an extension on the reorganization contract as Vann intended to ply the men who would be attending a 'Business Men's League' where he intended to 'hammer away for money.'[372]

All of the Johnson and Vann's scrambling came to nothing as no reorganization was accomplished. By September 1920 the election bore down and most of the energy that Vann had for making the deal was dead. George was left to using Vann to feel out the possible sale of his shares of the Lincoln stock.[373] Thomas Cripps has suggested that the deal fell through because Vann did not trust George to shepherd the Lincoln production schedule forward with up-to-date concepts and therefore wanted nothing to do with the

[370] Letter from George Johnson to Robert L. Vann,
[371] Letter from Robert L. Vann to George Johnson, 7/21/1920, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[372] Ibid.
[373] Letter from Robert L. Vann to George Johnson, 9/11/1920, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

LMPC unless Micheaux was a partner.[374] The documentation does not support that interpretation. Though part of the failure of the reorganization gambit might have been due to the fact that those prospective investors who were most available were also limping to the table with a lack of funds, i.e., Pace, George would later indicate in his notes that a major impediment to the million-dollar deal Vann and he had tried to work was Noble and Smith's refusal to come East to meet with the prospective investors. George put this down to Noble's schedule with film-making.[375]

Elsewhere in George Johnson's notes was a different explanation: the Lincoln board's unwillingness to treat the work and expenses of Johnson and Vann as expenditures the two could recoup from the company.[376] As Noble was still a board member throughout the tussle with reorganization, it seems likely that the two explanations are rather one and the same. Further, there were other possible investors besides Pace and there is no record of the board making any effort to meet with prospective investors or to provide the requested extension of the reorganization contract. Given Vann's assertion that, once past July, he was not likely going to be able to get anything done until after the election, it is not clear what an extension would have looked like, so the board's apparent unwillingness to go that route is somewhat understandable. The lack of any effort from the board remains glaring and George found it unacceptable that the company had been operating under the

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[374] Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942*, New york, N.Y., 1993(1977), p.83.
[375] George Johnson, 'My Activities in Negro Motion Pictures,' undated, Microfilm, GPJ Collection; Letter from George Johnson to Noble Johnson, undated, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[376] 'Statement for May 1920, Omaha Office, G.P. Johnson, Mg'r,' undated, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

assumption that the expenses of the travel, accommodations, and incorporation fees were to have been borne by Vann and himself. George composed a statement which was submitted to the board and which noted that the failure of any deal to move forward to completion was not in any way his own fault as he had carried out every one of the actions he had proposed and had gotten the results which were expected. The deal had come unraveled, he stated, because the board showed little interest in supporting their efforts and had fought the basic expenses of such an endeavor. In the end he and Vann had become 'disgusted and dropped the matter entirely,' as the board's intransigence regarding reimbursements was 'without grounds, reason, or justice.'[377] George's records do not provide a definitive answer regarding whether or not he and Vann were able to recoup their expenditures, but no other major reorganization attempts would be made after that date.

The explanation for the West Coast office's unwillingness to come East for a meet remains elusive, though, as a bottom line, it is hard to see that they were willing to relinquish control of their company to a new board. This explanation seems to be supported by the fact that Vann felt the need to explain a new board to Smith and that, thereafter, only George was obviously keen on a reorganization with serious money players from the East. George's meetings with Levy and Vann also begin to show the LMPC as an organization that had lost some of the startup enthusiasm which had taken them to the precipice of growing into a deeply entrenched player in the race film game. The company was not done as a production unit so their efforts to raise money would

[377] Ibid.

continue, though those efforts would not meet with many breakthroughs. For instance, Robert R. Church Jr., son of the famous mulatto African-American entrepreneur Robert R. Church Sr., repeatedly echoed the oft stated superlative that the Lincoln titles were the 'best Negro pictures that I have ever seen' and, happily booking the pictures into his Lincoln Theater located on Memphis' famed Beale street, expressed his confidence in the LMPC's profitability. However, when George contacted him about Church's Solvent Savings Bank & Loan underwriting 50 shares of the film venture's preferred stock, George was fobbed off onto the bank's cashier with the only gloss of hope being the added suggestion that the Lincoln search for funds be taken to the coming 1921 Annual Session of the National Negro Banker's Association.[378] None of the subsequent efforts would be made on behalf of a potential million dollar capitalization and no further serious discussions would ensue regarding the Lincoln Motion Picture Company absorbing or otherwise bringing Oscar Micheaux under the control of the Lincoln imprint.

The Lincoln Company Goes to War

Black participation in the United States' military has been a constant throughout the nation's history and such has unsurprisingly been a source of pride and African-American claims on the rights promised to America's citizens. Those claims often carried the rhetoric of the prevailing values of this or that era while also failing to deeply question the aspects of those values that were problematic for the country's people of color. The years following Emancipation and the end of the Civil War saw the United States become increasingly involved in military skirmishes that involved conflicts with various non-

[378] Letter from Robert Church, Jr. to George Johnson, 8/5/1921, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

European peoples that included Native Americans in the U.S. Southwest, insurrectionists in the Philippines, and punitive campaigns against hostilities overflowing from the Mexican Civil War. African American troops participated in all such military actions and, despite the often racist attitudes accompanying the flexing of American might, blacks looked upon the performance of colored troops as both indicative of the value and capability of the race in terms of a patriarchal social schema and its concomitant mythologies of masculinity, and a basis for being considered deserving of total inclusion in the egalitarian American project. The Native American, Filipino, and Mexican others against whom the black troopers battled were foils that putatively provided an opportunity for the American-ness of the Negro as a type to shine through.

Over the course of the LMPC's existence the company would release only eight titles, including newsreels, and three would involve black military exploits. In 1921 the company returned to the theme of Negro troops in order to bolster their release schedule. George took Gant to Arizona's Fort Huachuca to film the all-Negro 10th Calvary for two days of shooting which, in spite of spotty sunlight further obscured by dust, resulted in a one-reel news piece, *A Day with the 10th Cav*.[379] The production cost of the news reel was noted at $364.95, including Gant's services as a cameraman, and involved the soldiers putting on a mock battle which was then exhibited on screens in theaters, schools, lodges, and churches across the nation.[380] This modest undertaking was introduced by a note passed along as a 'foreword' which posited the imagery of real black soldiers as verification of a history of

[379] Letter from Oscar J.W. Scott, Chaplain of the 10th Calvary, January 12, 1922, GPJ Film Collection.
[380] GPJ Film Collection.

black patriotism which flowed from a warrior status rooted in a nearly primordial masculinity that had led members of the race to be 'with Sheridan in 1867 fighting red skins; with Crook in 1886 in Arizona; with Wheeler & Roosevelt in 1898 in Cuba; with Chafee in (the) Philippines in 1900–1907; with Pershing in Mexico in 1916.'[381] The film was intended as an homage to African-American heroism as expressed in terms of a partnership between blacks and whites seeking international power and the foreword evinces no awkwardness with the obvious contradictions in trying to address the worth and belonging of one people of color by assisting in the suppression of another dusky people. The foreword supported a position which saw a strategic value of isolating an other so as to showcase an indelible marriage between the battles fought on behalf of the nation's future and an elevation of the race in the eyes of whites due to the unflinching African-American alacrity to take up arms in times of war.

Numerous other film companies, black and white, sought to tap into market potentials offered by producing imagery of black participation in the military. Even the outspoken DuBois saw black participation in the military as an essential method of taking a place at the table of American rights, and though he acknowledged voices that questioned fighting the country's battles when they were tinged with the very racism that hounded Negroes, he ultimately came down on the side of taking up arms as a way of bolstering claims on citizenship. In the September 1918 issue of *The Crisis* DuBois famously noted that, over time, Negroes fighting for the country in its various wars had been instrumental in gaining freedom in the North, the abolition of the slave trade, the

[381] 'Foreword,' telegram from GPJ Film Collection.

vote in some areas of the North, support in the overall abolition movement, and, ultimately, emancipation.[382] DuBois put the magazine's position in succinct terms: 'The Crisis says, first your country, then your rights.'[383] This oft quoted passage indicates that, while DuBois at no time felt that Booker T. Washington's principles of putting off the call for full equality of rights was to be followed for small pecuniary gains, he did for a time feel strongly that taking responsibility for the race's ownership of claims on the nation and the ideals connected therein hinged on stepping up for military duty. While DuBois would later understandably return to the above quote lamenting that he was mistaken, as he had not realized 'the full horror of war and its wide impotence as a method of social reform,' African Americans were still broadly wont to find pride and connections between military service and expectations regarding their rights as Americans.[384] Recognizing that source of interest and community identification with positive feelings about the race, the race's place in the country, and its chances for better experiences as citizens, the Lincoln company presented their photoplays and news footage of black participation in the U.S. military for commercial reasons, to show whoever would watch that black men stood and fought with the best, and to interact with the changing Negro consciousness regarding the place of blacks and the meaning of blackness in America.

It is perhaps an unexpected curiosity that the realism which the Johnson's sought in order to make their film's more palatable, especially those involving black participation in

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[382] W.E.B. DuBois, *The Crisis*, September 1918.
[383] Ibid.
[384] Elizabeth Kier and Ronald R. Krebs, 'Introduction: War and Democracy in Comparative Perspective,' *In War's Wake: International Conflict and the Fate of Liberal Democracy*, Kier and Krebs, (eds). (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.9.

the U.S. military, nonetheless left spaces for interpretation by other American sub-cultures who could take the films and interpret or experience them as speaking to their particular need to see public images of their group projected in ways that spoke to a nationalistic and hyper-masculine heroism within those populations. For instance, in September of 1918, and again in February of 1919, the manager of El Paso, Texas' Imperial Theatre requested *Trooper*, the first time referring to it as 'that Mexican feature entitled *Troop K*,' and the second time as '*The Battle of Carrizal* (or *Soldier K* or *Troop K*).'[385] It is not clear from the record if the Imperial Theatre was able to rent *Trooper*. An incomplete listing of exhibition dates for the Lincoln titles does not list a showing at El Paso's Imperial, though *Trooper* was shown in a Baptist church in September of 1917.[386] George would later exhibit the final Lincoln title, *By Right of Birth*, in a San Antonio, Texas theater that had only Spanish speakers in the audience. Naturally, as there were no translated title cards, he had 'quite a time showing it there,' but this demonstrates the LMPC was attempting to reach across cultural bounds and in to all available exhibition spaces, so a showing of *Trooper* to Latino audiences was a distinct possibility.[387] There were entertainment spaces that could derive enjoyment from seeing black American troops mowed down by Mexican troops in a massacre that represented for some blacks the pinnacle of heroism for American Negroes and for Latinos a determined stand against U.S. imperialism in the Southwest border region.

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[385] Letters from Felix Padilla to the LMPC, 9/4/1918 and 2/20/1919, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[386] 'An Incomplete List of Lincoln Bookings Compiled From Contracts Since December Nineteen Sixteen,' Box 55, Folder 10.
[387] George Johnson, 148.

The Last Deal: By Right of Birth and the Wind Down of the LMPC

By 1920 the company had five or so prints of six films, including the fourth narrative, *A Man's Duty*, which were being passed and mailed to various theaters on a countrywide basis. The revenue from those films came back to the production end slowly, so, though there were audiences who wanted to see new LMPC titles and theaters ready to exhibit the pictures, money needed to be raised in order to begin production on the next film, which, because the audiences were gaining in their sophistication and expectations, needed to be six reels or more. George submitted one of a dozen or so scripts for production and his *By Right of Birth* was chosen, though he later reveled in a letter to Noble of the increasing power he had over the Lincoln operations at that time and took credit for pressing *Birth* into production and for making it a hit by casting Anita Thompson in the female lead.[388] A scenarist, African American Dora Mitchell, was hired for the production in order to help shore up the script and there was apparently a small difference in opinion between herself and the LMPC regarding her just recompense. Expense reports for the film indicate she was paid $20, though it is not clear from that listing if such was the only payment.[389] A letter she submitted to the company with her itemized statement of services rendered noted that, in granting that the company had a limited audience and limited funds, she had provided scenario and continuity assistance with full knowledge that she would be paid a fraction of the going rate for such work when done for the major studios. Mitchell understood scales of pay at the larger studios as she had done some writing for the

[388] Letter from George Johnson to Noble Johnson, 9/27/1921, GPJ Collection.
[389] George P. Johnson Film Collection.

Morosco-Bosworth-Pallas Studio under the Paramount umbrella.[390] Though the scenarist had agreed to pull George's story outline into a production ready piece at favor wages, she seems to have soon tired of the sacrifices of working at the small-time level. Mitchell argued that her acceptance of a reduced rate was an act of generosity. She requested recompense of $60 and referenced $50 payouts as the amount that could be expected from 'the smallest and most insignificant Company.' Mitchell deigned to presume that Gant would have been aware of the industry standards of remuneration while likewise assuming that George and Smith, though each four or five years into the picture game, might very well be ignorant of the scale.[391] Such plain insults, partially rooted in an apparent belief that the black portion of the company could not be trusted to know its business, demonstrate the basis for the premium that George placed on maintaining the LMPC as a concern run on the up and up, legitimate and, if not as flush with cash as the large firms, aware of and adherent to their business principles and practices. Racial solidarity had its limits and the pecuniary expectations of professionals had to be accounted for. The company's ability to operate outside the channels of friendship or racial obligation was central to the type of business reach they envisioned for their enterprise.

Birth was planned as the company's most ambitious project to that point and, though infused with a good deal of humor, was a drama which centered around dishonest land deals, racial misidentification, and romance. A white stock broker, P.H. Updike, tried his hand as an 'angel' financier and came forward with an offer to provide funds for the

[390] *Sentinel* (San Antonio), July 9, 1921, George P. Johnson Negro Film Collection.
[391] Letter from Dora Mitchell to George Johnson, George P. Johnson Negro Film Collection.

production of the next movie after first requesting that his brother, the owner of Updike Lumber and Coal in Omaha, vet George and his credentials.[392] George, practiced as he was at finagling white sponsorship, was able to produce several letters of recommendation from businessmen in the Omaha area and navigated a successful sit down with the Updike sibling. Satisfied that the general booking was going to be handled with competence and energy, the LMPC and P. H. Updike entered into an agreement. George was informed that he would be needed in Los Angeles for the several weeks of production time. Johnson waggled a leave of absence from the Omaha post office by presenting a physician's release due to exhaustion which, given his years of double duty, was likely grounded in some truth.[393] George stocked his wife and young daughter with coal and headed west to assist in the oversight of the new picture. The travel to Los Angeles was paid for via the returns George made while showing *A Man's Duty* on a 60% commission basis in Topeka, Kansas, Muskogee, Oklahoma, and the Texas cities of Dallas, Fort Worth, and El Paso. Every opportunity to pull in revenue had to be mercilessly undertaken and George getting to the coast with quickness was second to him doing so at least expense.

Distribution was not fixed by financing and, and as getting a profitable return on the film was the goal, there was some concern on Updike's part that the company's distribution circuit was not going to get shake enough dollars from the nation's black audiences to make the endeavor worthwhile, which in turn signaled that he was likely to be unavailable for further financial contributions that would make real the dream of producing a film while distributing another. The problem was that too many small houses

[392] 'By Right of Birth,' GPJ Film Collection.
[393] Ibid.

with low entry prices were being relied upon to provide the kind of assurance that Updike sought regarding his investment. George devised a plan to demonstrate that the film could be successful in bigger houses and that a distribution scheme that sought to privilege such venues early in the film's release would prove profitable enough to satisfy the investor. Johnson would put on a 'Grand Opening' of the film that would demonstrate that the increased cost of producing titles that could compete in the market could be reliably recouped by showings in large houses. In this way the money for distribution was going to be raised, as well.

George set out to get a large theater and, unable to get the Philharmonic Auditorium, which boasted Los Angeles' highest seating capacity, the Trinity Auditorium was settled on with seating for 1,526 and a rental cost of $500.[394] George had some reason to believe that he could fill that space at a tidy profit. A January 24, 1921 showing of one of the Lincoln titles, likely *A Man's Duty*, had occurred at the Trinity and 1,714 seats had been sold, 133 at the fairly extravagant price of $1.50,1,048 at the price of one dollar, and the remainder being split between seats sold for fifty and seventy-five cents. Total gross receipts for that showing had been $1,576 and the net ended up being just over $540 after war taxes and expenses. With the precedent of the January 24 showing and fliers advising the public to buy up their tickets with haste since 1,000 had been turned away from the January 24 showing, the *Birth* opening was set for June 22 and 23, 1921.[395] Blueprints were made of the seating arrangement and attractive females were hired to canvas the city while selling the seats individually, 563 at 55 cents, 261 at 85 cents, and 702 at $1.10. Advertisements

[394] Ibid.
[395] 'Another Massive Entertainment,' GPJ Film Collection.

were placed in newspapers black and white and, after paying to have a curtain and a projector installed, as the Trinity had none, total expenditures ended up at about $1,100. The shows were sold out two days prior to the opening and the gala event included two full bands, solo entertainers, the service of footmen for those who came by auto, and the presence of bankable Hollywood faces, both black and white, including the Our Gang star Ernie 'Sunshine Sammy' Morrison.[396]

Other luminaries were called upon and an example of the way the Lincoln gambit was propelled by the synergy between leading black Los Angeles artists and businessmen can be found in the $100 dollars spent on the J.C. Spikes Orchestra, a jazz outfit playing the latest sounds during the film's prologue. John Curry Spikes and his brother, Benjamin 'Reb' Spikes, each of mixed black and white heritage, were well known musicians of the time who, after travelling the Southwest, had settled in Los Angeles and, as entrepreneurs, ran a music store, publishing imprint, and recording label, Sunshine Records.[397] The Spikes wrote and published the theme music for *Birth*, a piece entitled 'Juanita,' an attempt on the part of the Lincoln Company to cross-pollenate between entertainment markets while adding to the uniqueness of the film. The LMPC were privileged with associations to the Spikes name just a couple of years after their highly successful and oft recorded 'Someday

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[396] Ibid.

[397] For background on the Spikes brothers see Floyd Nevin, 'The Spikes Brothers: A Los Angeles Saga,' found on the Doctor Jazz website, http://www.doctorjazz.co.uk/sbrosfl.html; also see the entries for each brother at the World War I Draft Registration Cards site, http://www.doctorjazz.co.uk/draftcards1.html#assdcbfs; some information can also be found at the brothers' respective Wikipedia pages, 'John Spikes,' at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Spikes, and 'Reb Spikes' at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Spikes.

Sweetheart' dropped. In turn, Lincoln agreed to let the Spikes brothers use the name of their new picture's lead character for the song and to advertise the tune as the featured piece of music accompanying each showing. The parties split publishing and manufacturing costs while the musicians were required to do their best to advertise the film and to shepherd attempts to have the song committed to music rolls and phonograph records.[398]

One interesting aspect of the ad campaign for the gala opening was the broad and seemingly indiscriminate use of varying terms referring to the black target audience. The aforementioned flier mentioned 'Negro Music,' 'the largest colored musical organization in the West,' 'the Afro-American Concert Band,' and 'Malcolm Patton, the wonderful Race baritone.'[399] There is no desire here to argue that each term represented some sub-categorical population. Nonetheless, the advertisement seemed to want to make sure that no corner of the black collective identification was left without inclusive remark, which suggests that there was both ambivalence regarding the terminology that was to be used when addressing the race as a constituency and a multiplicity of attitudes, traditions, and nomenclatures for blackness. The idea of blackness, of being black in America had a history of being meddled with, of being turned over in the mind and reassessed for new plays. These many names, thrown haphazardly about on a flier, sometimes faithfully reproduced a moniker taken up by those being referred to, as in the case of the Afro-American Concert Band, and in other instances simply attached a subject individual to the

[398] 'Agreement: Lincoln Motion Picture Co. and Spikes Bros. Music Co,' Reel 7, pp. 348-350, GPJ Collection.
[399] 'Another Massive Entertainment,' GPJ Film collection.

group. These people of a nation, America, and of a region, the West, at all times understood those aspects of their identity were to be had in addition to a blackness that placed them in an alternate universe which existed wherever they found themselves, an alternate universe that hung over them. The doubleness noted by Dubois is here rendered even more multiple than any binary tally. The overall effect is supportive of affiliative notions of race, including the term 'The Race,' with its martial undertones of a bloc standing at the ready, the suffering of the one reverberating through the situation of the whole, and a faint filial stance attempting to reach back to a shared root in Africa. The Lincoln Company sought to bring the black community into a single physical, public space to experience their product, to absorb its message and content as entertainment and an edification regarding the group.

The film held its own aesthetically as both the *Los Angeles Examiner* and the *Daily Herald*, a Hearst paper, took note of the film's presentation of black dramatic acting skills. *The Examiner* piece noted that the film 'offers proof that colored players can develop histrionic talent above that required for straight comedy, and *The Daily Herald's* tepid endorsement of a 'credible showing in a new field' was fleshed out by the admission that

> So rarely have we ever considered the Negro in pictures other than in comedy roles that the showing of a six-reel dramatic production featuring colored actors and actresses in serious roles is attracting more than usual interest along film row.[400]

These nods to the Lincoln Company's dogged efforts to produce filmic subject matter representing blackness in serious, human scenarios and demonstrating responses to

[400] 'By Right of Birth,' Microfilm, GPJ Film Collection.

issues which allowed the characters to reflect mainstream, middle class values, though likely in part prompted by Lincoln press releases, were nonetheless remarks of acknowledgment. Still, Updike needed further placation, so George took the film and the Spikes ensemble to the almost all-white Riverside where it was shown to a full house. George sought to further allay Updike's concerns by putting together a roadshow that would include similar productions of fanfare and pomp so as to charge the higher prices that would guarantee a timely return on the stock broker's investment. To demonstrate the validity of a barnstorming tour of this sort he put on special showings in Omaha, exhibiting *By Right of Birth* to both black and white houses that were reportedly packed and enthusiastic in their celebration of the film. The move to show to a white audience indicates that there was at all times in the Lincoln history the goal of getting black-made films in front of white audiences so as to maximize profit potentials and to have their presentation of blackness seen by all.

Updike was impressed enough with those demonstrations that he advanced the money necessary to take a compact road show of special showings featuring Clarence Brooks as the in-person star attraction to the East where the bodies were. Updike was able to recoup his investment in the LMPC but it took a number of months and he was unwilling to advance money for a roadshow under reorganization.[401] The returns were hardly a windfall and, in the meantime, Updike became unavailable for further monetary assistance as he went heavy with wheat futures at the wrong time and was badly turned upside down

[401] Letter from George Johnson to Robert L. Vann, undated, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

on that account.[402] The fairly strong successes that were had at these special exemplary showings could not be sustained for long periods. Indeed, the LMPC's goal of netting $100 a night during the front end of Birth's run was not really feasible. The cost of production and distribution was put at $7,625, of which the company put up only $214. Thomas Cripps provided a cursory but credible assessment of the numbers behind the steep fiscal incline the company was attempting to mount and it can be summed up in the fact that, if a film was to cost $7,500 - $8,000, there would need to be 15 gala openings of the sort noted above or travel to 75 smaller houses (referred to by Cripps as 'ghettoes') at the much elevated rental cost of $100 a night in order to cover costs and then make the concern profitable enough to then finance a new film.[403]

The company understood these limitations and their resultant expectancies were less demanding than the above assessment. George's 1922 study of the Texas-Oklahoma-Louisiana-Alabama-Arkansas-Mississippi territory under Thomas Ireland's agency claimed there were 100 houses or so in that area of he country in which to show *A Man's Duty* on its second run and *By Right of Birth* on its first.[404] George felt that there should be 75 dates a year for *A Man's Duty* at a fee of $25 dollars per booking for a total of $1,875. He thought 100 booking dates was not out of the question and also noted that some houses were still paying $50 a night for *Duty*, so he suggested an annual take for that film in Ireland's area was in the range of $2,000. *Birth* was expected to show 87 to 100 days in the territory at $50 an evening, though that was to be reached with showings that would

[402] Notes from GPJ, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.
[403] Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942*, New York, N.Y., Oxford University Press, 1993(1977), pp. 87,88.
[404] '"*A Man's Duty*" and "*By Right of Birth*,"' Box 55, Folder 10, GPJ Collection.

average $25 to $100 a day and was expected to even out to $4,330 for the year. These numbers make it clear that George was intent on continuing with the distribution methods the company had always used, either because he had insufficient time an energies to dedicate to more road show extravaganzas or because there were not enough population center's to make such profitable on an ongoing basis. These numbers also do not fully explicate the overhead and costs of distribution. At least one national distribution company, Philadelphia's Comet Film Exchange, announced the creation of a branch dedicated to servicing the race film industry with a promise of the same distribution that the white producers were getting.[405] It does not appear that the terms were good enough to lure George away from the Lincoln set up. What is clear is that, in an era of increasing costs for mainstream filmmaking, the LMPC was stuck in a position wherein their best efforts did not move them beyond small-time film-making and the marginal receipts of the outdated mode of distribution to which they were wed.

During that time the race film business had become more crowded than ever with one-off companies and the spread of influenza was beginning to reverse the expansion of theater spaces available to African Americans, a disruption of distribution cited by George as final straw which brought the company to its knees.[406] George still found reason to optimistically note in a letter that, while economic circumstances were not strong for blacks in September of 1921, members of the race in urban centers such as Chicago still managed to have money for food, to get dressed up go out, and to spend their leisure time

[405] Letter from Comet Film Exchange, Colored Department, 6/21/1921, GPJ Collection.
[406] This is an explanation that George provided in multiple entries comprising undated notes, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

and dollars on spectator entertainments such as sporting events.[407] In-Law Ira McGowan was less sanguine and wrote George from the Micheaux Film Company's New York offices in August of 1921 and bemoaned the ever-tightening noose around the opportunities for the high-end race firms to profit from the industry they had fought relentlessly to erect. He noted that the market would not sustain 50 cents a head in most cases and that the growing efforts by white money to produce films for the black market meant economies of scale not available to black firms were undercutting profitability. McGowan specifically pointed to Jewish film companies such as Robert Levy's Reol Productions as depressing the market by coming to the game with funds ready to produce between five and ten films that were then released at cut rates since the market was so unpromising. The audiences as a whole did not tend to care about the quality of Negro productions so much as the constancy of new titles, a development that placed businesses like the Lincoln Motion Picture Company at marked disadvantage.[408]

As the LMPC's options shrank the solidarity of the project began to fray. In addition to George's unhappiness with the level of support he received from the home office in Los Angeles during his reorganization work, by 1921 some of the primary supporting figures within the organization started kicking against the company's increasingly wobbly path. Micheaux approached Thomas Ireland, the company's long-time agent from the New Orleans area, in yet another effort on the part of one of these two race film mainstays to

[407] Letter from George Johnson to Noble Johnson, 9/27/1921, GPJ Collection.
[408] Letter from Ira McGowan to George Johnson, 8/17/1921, GPJ Collection.

poach talent and resources from the other.[409] The company line was that they felt the choice between the LMPC and Micheaux' group was obvious and would keep Ireland in the Lincoln fold.[410] The company tried to put on the countenance of strength and sureness by announcing that, in spite of the company's string of failures to manage a reorganization, partnership, or steady infusion of capital, 'We are now in the game for good and are going to show them all a few things and knowing our business we have no worries.'[411] Ireland's response that he had 'always been a Lincoln "booster," and hope always to be one,' comes off as non-committal and was underscored by complaints that George was too busy to properly look after the interests of the company given the fact that it appeared they had been outmaneuvered for the contract to produce the Committee for Public Information's reel on black soldiers.[412] Moreover, Ireland was of the opinion that, given the closings of so many houses catering to the colored business, only a more vigorous schedule of road shows could keep the company even minimally profitable. 'Even if you were able at present to release weekly or monthly, the company would soon go to the wall unless the road shows were developed' Ireland explained before going on to further complaints about the company's misuse of a non-Lincoln title.[413] Ireland's prognostications were dire.

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[409] Letter from Lincoln offices to Thomas D. Ireland, no legible date or information about the composer is available, though it is likely from Clarence Brooks as a letter found in what seems to be chronological order is addressed to Brooks from Ireland and attends to some of the details from the letter in question, Microfilm, Thomas D. Ireland, p. 231b, Reel 12, GPJ Collection.
[410] Ibid.
[411] Ibid.
[412] Letter from Thomas D. Ireland to Clarence Brooks, undated, Microfilm, Thomas D. Ireland, p. 232a, Reel 12, GPJ Collection.
[413] Ibid.

The lack of concert found in the company's dealings with Ireland had an analogue in the case of Clarence Brooks, the lead of the last two Lincoln films. According to a letter from cameraman, director, and stockholder Harry Gant to the Lincoln president, J.T. Smith, Brooks was on the road and for his own purposes putting himself forward as the featured aspect of the recent titles, a breach of an agreement between the Company and the actor.[414] Gant was beside himself at the thought of Brooks flaunting those instructions and, as he felt that much of Brooks' success in front of the camera was due to his own work, he resolutely demanded that Brooks be recalled and the prints removed from his possession.[415] The archive contains no documents establishing how this spat was resolved in the immediate aftermath of that letter, but the long-term reality of the Lincoln Company's situation made it a moot point. The fact that Brooks was not someone the group was comfortable with while on the road, coupled with Gant's sense that Brooks could not truly carry his roles without help indicate, that the Lincoln Motion Picture Company was no longer a viable top-flight production house. The company had faltering distribution, no regular production schedule, and a contracting field of exhibition. Though there were preliminary plans for a sixth narrative film, tentatively entitled *Black Americans* or *The Heart of the Negro*, no production would ever get underway and the receipts would continue to dwindle with the closing of more and more exhibition houses

[414] Letter from Harry Gant to J.T. Smith, 9/19/1921, Microfilm, Harry Gant, p. 87b, Reel 5, GPJ Collection.
[415] Ibid.

in the important southeastern circuit.[416] A plan to attempt raising money through franchising was also abandoned or bore no mentionable results.[417]

The expenses of moving a scant five or six prints of each film around the country meant that the old bugaboos that had harried the production company's prior to Hollywood rationalizing their distribution and funding kept at the heels of the LMPC throughout their years. 'We lost the money on the distribution of it' George would later note, and he 'lacked the ability to pick out and interest men with money and business knowledge to back me up or join me.'[418] As Cripps put it, 'there was no way to get clear, ever.'[419] Such was the case even though it is certain that Dora Mitchell was not the only provider of services that worked for the LMPC at cut rates. Whatever marginal payment was made to George, it was no doubt well below market for the many hats he wore for the company. J.T. Smith composed a letter of recommendation for George near the end of the Lincoln run and he listed the moonlighting postal worker as having done banking, sales, correspondence, management, and treasurer duties.[420]

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[416] In re the title of the sixth film, the title *Black Americans* comes from George P. Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' 238, and from 'Franchise Contract for Lincoln Pictures,' Box 55, Folder 10, though that document does not specify the nature of the title and, along with mentions of *By Right of Birth* and *A Man's Duty*, listed *Beauty in Ebony*, as well. It seems likely that these names were placed on the franchise agreement in order to set up future productions, so a seventh title may have been in the works; The reference to *The Heart of the Negro* comes from Donald Bogle, *Bright Boulevards, Bold Dreams: The Story of Black Hollywood* (New York: Random House, LLC., 2009) P. 36.
[417] Franchise Contract, Box 55, Folder 10, GPJ Collection.
[418] Comment about distribution from Letter from George Johnson, 10/3/1967, Microfilm, GPJ Collection; Comment about attracting financing from George P. Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 131.
[419] Ibid.
[420] Letter from J.T. Smith, Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

Though Noble, George, and the rest of the officers had set out to conduct their business as any other well run concern would have, which is to say, as a white-run company would have, and though they kept afloat for a period which outpaced all other black-owned race film concerns save Micheaux,' they were unable to place the business in a balanced position of profitability. In spite of George's belief that the company might have been able to create a more solid economic base by beginning with the production of the typical comic fare involving chicken-stealing and watermelon eating stereotypes before moving on to the high and clean subject matter for which they were known, the Lincoln company had helped to create and expose a market for black film-going consumption that was based on the presentation of black bodies on the screen in a particular light, and, as noted above, the viability of that market was reflected in Hollywood's interest in coming up with a few major works aimed at exploring that market.[421] However, this meant competition from much more practiced production teams that had better actors and more resources at their disposal. The writing was likely on the wall at the time that Noble tendered his resignation, but by 1923 it had become clear that the firm was not going to be able to crest the climb to a stable profitability which was supportive of the kind of production schedule that was necessary to sustain a film industry in the margins inhabited by African Americans. At some point in that year the project was simply dropped. Virtually all of the other race film production houses would soon follow suit, including Levy's Reol Productions Corporation, which would wither and perish in 1924. The black world did not in fact work as the white world did.

[421] George P. Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 132,133.

Access to Markets and the Concept of Detour: Some Comparative Thoughts on the LMPC's Demise

Traditional methods of raising the capital for an entrepreneurial venture revolve around private savings and loans received from banks or other financial institutions.[422] 'Bootstrap financing' usually refers to innovative, non-traditional methods of raising the necessary capital for start-up or early-stage growth of the ventures, which can include family loans, monies raised from insurance policies, and home equity loans.[423] The LMPC's use of the personal funds of the officers, including two sets of brothers, can be seen as a sort of bootstrap financing. George Johnson and Swan Micheaux were brought in by their respective siblings to provide absolutely critical assistance on multi-faceted fronts with remuneration being provided well under the market rate. Swan Micheaux glibly noted that he had stuck with his brother's production company from $25 per month to $2500 year in part because 'blood is thicker than water.'[424] The filial trust and history of obligation that comes with such a joint venture can be priceless and the knowledge of the abilities of family members cannot easily be reproduced outside of family ties. The sense that the good of the company rests with the good of the individual and vice versa is likely to at least seem more secure when siblings are working together. The early world of cinema had numerous examples of brother recruiting brother to build movie-making companies. The most obvious example would be the Warner Brothers, Harry, Albert, Sam, and Jack.

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[422] Thorne, J., 'Alternative financing for entrepreneurial ventures,' *Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice*, 1989(Spring), 7-9.
[423] Howard Van Auken and Lynn E. Neeley, 'Evidence of bootstrap financing among small start-up firms,' *Journal of Entrepreneurial & Small Business Finance*, 1996, Vol. 5, Issue 3.
[424] Letter from Swan Micheaux to George Johnson, 9/24/1920, GPJ Collection.

Perhaps more reminiscent of the Johnsons were the Kordas, oldest Alexander who brought on younger brothers Zoltan, the director, and Vincent, who would handle set design.

The Korda's adopted England as one homeland and then moved on with equal ease to America, always finding a Hungarian diaspora to stir into a cohort.[425] The ability of the Kordas to find a way in a variety of settings never dissolved their Jewish-Hungarian roots. They would often bicker and discuss in their native tongue, their given names, Lacikem, Vincikum, and Zolikan, bubbling to the surface. Alexander was honored in Britain with a knighthood, though his penchant for using Hungarian labor at his Denham studios, a sort of extension of the family concept of business, riled some observers. Writer Graham Greene would complain with nationalistic irritation that the British had 'saved the English film industry from American competition only to surrender it to far more alien control.'[426] This quote brings to full light the types of prejudice which could flow from the desire to see one's own group, here the blooded Brits, portrayed faithfully, something which Greene appeared to believe was likely best accomplished by products of the culture, as opposed to outsiders, who would also, as a side benefit, reap the monetary rewards of the work. It is instructive to note that, while the travels that the Kordas undertook throughout western Europe, from Hungary to France to England, were not without the need of a facility with negotiating such biases, they were in each instance nonetheless able to participate fully in

[425] Michael Korda, *Charmed Lives: A Family Romance* (New York, N.Y., Harper Collins, 2002) p.12. Apparently, Alexander Korda kept the employ at his studios of may individuals who had performed favors for him, some life saving, while in Hungary or an itinerant.
[426] Clive Aslet, *Villages of Britain: The Five Hundred Villages that Made the Countryside* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), p.173.

the markets that they pursued and their audience was never really limited to members of their 'alien' roots. This meant that they were primarily operating on the same field with the same goals as the dominant culture's movers and shakers and could communicate quite effectively with the monied elite through the product of their activities.

Alexander Korda, who established one of Britain's first major movie houses, Denham Film Studios, brought money in because, even if his films could not truly compete with Hollywood on the world scene, his productions were suitably outsized and could depict narratives of English costumed pomp which spoke directly to the vanities and tastes of British financiers.[427] As a result, even when Alexander's films, which tended toward the overblown and massive of scale, were money losers, his access to the full array of audiences meant that his losses, and his victories would play out on big stages sporting the opportunity for huge profits. Alexander had an ecumenical expanse of knowledge and interest underpinning his personality and such allowed him to command the serious attention of others even in what might have otherwise been considered foreign circumstances. His skills with people were the skills of his business. The great British director David Lean described him as 'an enormous personality' that 'could take any subject and talk on it for twenty minutes.'[428] In some sense the expansiveness of Alexander Korda's personality was the product of the field of play that was made available to him, and that field of play was open because the markets of his adopted homes were fully open to him. His ability to move over boundaries and borders, between cultures and milieus,

[427] Kati Marton, *The Great Escape: Nine Jews Who Fled Hitler and Changed the World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2006), p.114.
[428] Ibid., 113.

can be seen as the kind of movement toward multiplicity, and therefore the fullest available exploration and expression of self. The Johnsons sought similar relationships and spaces of opportunity during their migrations around the United States, though they were forced to do so under circumstances wherein the people most often able to help them, black or white, had to take into account the face that they would not have full access to all available markets.

John Sibley Butler has used M.S. Stewart's idea of 'Economic Detour' to help explain the effects that segregation had on the African-American community's efforts to support and expand entrepreneurial endeavors.[429] This theory essentially posits that interruptions and interference in African-American entrepreneurial access to the nation's full panoply of market interfaces has historically been supported by state-level sources of power and that, because only blacks were subjected to this systematic limitation on commercial relations, despite the African-American traditions of showing interest in business and support for the duties of citizenship, especially military service, America's peculiar brand of prejudice nonetheless refused to allow them open access to the nation's markets and instead forced them to conduct business along routes that ran the margins of the broader American marketplace.[430] The core of this theory is that black accumulations of wealth have generally been limited by racism's tendency to limit market access and the relations blacks can have with others in the American society.

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[429] John Sibley Butler, *Entrepreneurship and Self-Help Among Black Americans: A Reconsideration of Race and Economics (Rev.Ed.)* (Albany, N.Y., State University of New York Press, 2005), p.76.
[430] Ibid., pp. 77-80.

Butler pointed out that the 'sociology' of entrepreneurship tended to miss just how profoundly the black experiences with market access contrasted with those had by others, especially groups sociologist Edna Bonacich referred to as 'middleman minorities.'[431] Bonacich noted that certain groups such as the Jewry of Europe or the Chinese in Southeast Asia, groups who have taken up residence in host societies and flourished economically despite the impediments of certain prejudices, achieved success on a group-wide scale due to solidarity, thrift, and an almost agnostic openness to commercial dealings with all tiers of the host society, an approach to business which was usually enhanced by the pre-existing 'status gap' in those societies which left certain markets ripe for exploitation.[432] Those ingredients for success intertwined in ways that made the 'middleman minorities' cash strong. Solidarity within those groups meant collectivized business strategies, vertical integration within industries dominated by the group, and an ease of credit. Solidarity also helped to maintain a sense of separateness from the broader society which promoted the accumulation of capital for a return to the group's motherland.[433] When we take the forced commercial detouring of blacks and the strategies and advantages of middleman minorities into account, we can begin to see why Progressive Era African Americans sought to establish solidarity in their consumer habits and why the Johnsons moved about so much in an effort to find places of opportunity for the accumulation of profits where the detour effect was less onerous. These were not necessarily strategies that moved in the same direction, as Noble's resignation suggests.

[431] Edna Bonacich, 'The Theory of Middleman Minorities,' *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 38, 1973(October), pp. 583-594.
[432] Ibid.
[433] Ibid.

There can be only the most superficial of comparisons between the Kordas, the Johnsons, and the Micheaux siblings. Nonetheless, one meaningful comparison can be made regarding the absence of effective 'economic detouring' suffered by theses subjects and the resultant difference in their ability to benefit from the most complete use of their ideas, talents, and relations.

Humanity Fades to Darkness: Noble Johnson in Hollywood

A paragraph-long front-page article appeared in the November 8, 1919 edition of *The Chicago Whip* which noted in it's headline that a man of color had beaten and tied up former heavy weight boxing champion James 'Gentleman Jim' Corbett.[434] The lurid header, doubtless meant to arouse remnant desires to see a 'Great White Hope' defeated by a man of the race, did not mention that the event had not taken place in a boxing ring but had instead been part of a movie shoot for *The Midnight Man*, a serial being shown on the Loop, Chicago's white entertainment district. The man who produced the staged thuggery was none other than Noble Johnson, who was cast as the lead street punk, Spike. *The Whip* had an ongoing flap with Tony Langston, so they virtually never mentioned the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, but, on this occasion, aided by Noble's departure from the company, he was recognized as the 'famous colored actor,' and his work was front page material with the hook being in the final sentence of the blurb: 'Johnson looks so much like a Caucasian

[434] 'Colored Man Beats Jim Corbett: Ties Hands and Fixes Ex-Champion to a Post,' *The Chicago Whip*, 1/8/1919, p.1.

that few people were aware of the fact that Ethiopia was stretching forth her hands.'[435] The fun poked at the white audience's unknowing acceptance of entertainment which consisted of a white heavy weight being manhandled by a man of color was too delicious to pass up, a mass media passing event which might have been expected to be read as provocative was instead consumed by whites as a commonplace bit of movie peril. Part of the amusement that comes off the report is grounded in the fact that the few black viewers on hand were able to enjoy the play and its meaning while in the presence of whites without any tension, the flimsiness of race making itself known in a most satisfying manner. Noble was claimed in this instance as a representative of an international blackness, a complete connection to Africa which was able to accost whiteness on screen without arousing the riots that marred the aftermaths of Jack Johnson's victories. This instance of racial invisibility highlights one of the stark contrasts between Noble's career in Hollywood and the moonlighting he had done as a Negro star with the Lincoln Motion Picture Company. Upward mobility in the acting profession calls for high visibility and instant recognition on a host of levels that build connection with the audience. In this sort of addendum to our contemplations on the limits of race business and the demise of the LMPC, let us now briefly consider the shrink of Noble Johnson's acting career in Hollywood.

After Noble resigned from his Lincoln presidency and ceased appearing in matters connected with the company he was kept abreast of the concern's ongoing condition by

[435] Ibid.; Regarding *The Chicago Whip* and Tony Langston, see 'Under the Lash of the Whip,' *The Chicago Whip*, 4/17/1920, which included jabs at 'Tony, the verb breaker' who worked for 'Editor Abbott, the passport forgetter.'

George, though they were cautious to avoid speaking of Noble in connection with the black film business or his ongoing ownership of Lincoln stock. George noted in a 1921 letter that the advertisements at some black theater's for Raoul Walsh's *Serenade*, a picture in which Noble played a Latino captain, made no mention of him, a silence George and the Lincoln people left in tact. 'I am not saying nothing about you,' George assured, 'when they ask me I tell them that you are working independently in the big pictures.'[436] Indeed, Noble did maintain an independent work schedule as in 1922 he wrote the story for a western about Texas Rangers entitled *Tracks*, a 6-reel picture in which he played a supporting role.[437] The film, scripted by L.V. Jefferson, was bankrolled by the Western Picture Corporation and distributed as a 'Noble Johnson Production' by a New York company, Playgoers.[438] *Tracks* involved a plot that concerned a mystery regarding cattle rustling fortified with some humor and some romance. *Tracks* was not a memorable film, though it constitutes the only film Noble had a hand in writing that moved off centering the story around racial dynamics and conflicts over justice and access or inclusion. It would appear that Noble was trying to establish himself as a mainstream producer that could bring in a film for one of the independent groups that had access to Hollywood avenues of distribution. Noble wanted to make movies for the mainstream and managed to get a second title of his

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[436] Letter from George Johnson to Noble Johnson, 9/27/1921, GPJ Collection.
[437] 'Tracks,' promotional materials; 'Playgoers Will Handle Noble Johnson Film,' GPJ Collection.
[438] Catalogue of Copyright Entries, p. 12,061, http://books.google.com/books?id=nRADAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA522&lpg=PA522&dq=western+picture+corporation+tracks+1922&source=bl&ots=WNgW-WjmqE&sig=61l15lPF224clqB16IgrUXYhMZ8&hl=en&sa=X&ei=t4oWU8rZC6rA2QW44YGgDA&ved=0CCYQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=western%20picture%20corporation%20tracks%201922&f=false

produced for what must be assumed was a primarily white audience. This move came after Noble had left the LMPC, but not before the company had ceased operating. His decision to break from the tiny Negro film company may have had something to do with plans to more fully explore his options in Hollywood.

Noble left the company he had started because his roles with that company were successfully competing with his Hollywood roles, most notably that of Sweeney Bodin, the heavy in the Eddie Polo *Bull's Eye* serial. Noble was chosen for the role of Sweeney Bodin because the studio was looking for a 'powerful, active specimen of manhood' who was 'familiar with western types…an expert horseman' and had the fearlessness that would allow him to physically keep up with the star, Eddie Polo, a renowned fighter with a background in acrobatics.[439] The publicity for the Bodin role relied heavily on Noble's remarkable past of traveling the nation and mastering varying professions that showed off his virile masculinity. The veracity of the character was connected with Noble's years as a cow punch, miner, and homesteader in Colorado, his boxing exhibitions in New York, and his having run marathons in Washington. He was a jack-of-all trades described as being able to imbue the characters with realism which flowed from personal knowledge of many aspects of life and his expertise in many disciplines.[440] The official publicity raved about Noble's versatility but did not mention his race. Hollywood was not interested in wrestling with the confining perspectives regarding blackness that were carried by the mainstream audiences they sought, but in this instance the production company was satisfied to allow

[439] 'The Man for the Job,' Publicity on Noble Johnson in 'The Bull's Eye' Serial, GPJ Collection.
[440] 'Publicity of Noble Johnson in Universal Serial 'The Bull's Eye,' GPJ Collection.

Noble's race to remain silent on the screen, which, as we noted in the case of his role opposite Jim Corbett, meant his character played as white. The human traits of a man of color, one who would have been considered a Negro had his race been clear to the white audiences, were used to build a character that many whites no doubt assumed was that of a white personage. Such was a delicate balance to maintain.

I would argue that Noble's physical presence as captured by the lens and projected onto the screen was an example of a Jungian archetype regarding physical comeliness and masculine power, an instinctually recognized and mythologized ideal combining the ability to attract and violently repel, to control surrounding circumstances and to take from those circumstances what was desired.[441] His shape shifting, multi-talented, broadly experienced real-life persona -- the swimmer, the cow punch, the boxer, the horseman – created the sense that his masculine abilities were extraordinary and could not be easily bounded. As an archetype his visage tapped into instinctual mythologies that contain transcendent meanings and, in his case, part of that transcendent meaning was connected to his ability to move between racial strata, to be seen as white, black, or other. As an archetypal force of nature, Johnson's image as captured by the camera, which is to say his image removed from the real, everyday world, transported audiences and allowed his blackness to be uplifted, obscured, or shed altogether.

Noble's talents extended to the art of make-up application as he did much of his own preparation to play the various roles he was assigned. He famously prepared a full-body

[441] The use of Jungian 'archetypes' is taken and paraphrased from some of his basic writings on the subject. See Carl Jung, 'Instinct and the Unconscious,' Joseph Campbell, (ed.),*The Portable Jung* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 47-58.

application of gold paint, carefully avoiding asphyxiation, so as to play a Bronze Man In Cecil B. DeMille's 1915 version of *The Ten Commandments*, and his adeptness with the putty and grease paint of that craft was integral to his career as an actor inhabiting the characters of various ethnicities and races.[442] Whatever the odds might have been that two men who could rightly lay claim to the title 'The Man of a 1,000 Faces' would have hailed from Colorado Springs at the same time such was the case. Noble and his childhood friend, Lon Chaney, Sr., stalked the universal lots in various guises, each widely hailed for their transformational magic.

Noble appears to have taken the art of acting seriously and applied himself to preparing for roles by careful study. Delbert E. Davenport, a writer and producer with ties to the Philadelphia theater scene, interviewed Noble about his prep work for the role of the Eastern Prince in Douglas Fairbanks' 1924 epic *The Thief of Baghdad* and it was revealed that the actor had sat with as many as a dozen 'crystal gazers' in the Los Angeles area so as to bring as much authenticity as possible to his portrayal.[443] Davenport recognized Noble's unusually varied talents and sporting an interest in rags-to-riches stories that led him to publish a newsletter entitled *The American Ambition Association*, he wrote several glowing pieces about Noble during the mid-1920's and indicated that the actor was 'primarily and invariably a student,' adding that, 'if he achieves mastery it is on the basis of the self-made man.'[444] In that same article Davenport discussed Noble as

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[442] 'Noble in the Noble Bronze,' Delbert E. Davenport, GPJ Collection.
[443] Delbert E. Davenport, 'Discovers a Blind Crystal Gazer,' GPJ Collection.
[444] Delbert E. Davenport, 'On the Same Trail,' GPJ Collection; Ken Davenport, 'Tada! Introducing the Davenport Theater,' *The Producer's Perspective: A Broadway Producer's Opinion on Everything and Beyond*, 1/27/14,

having come to Hollywood with other actors from the days of East Coast productions with Lubin and he lumped Noble in as part of a distinct 'histrionic clan' that were 'on the same trail' to success in the industry.[445] For years, it would seem, the image of Noble Johnson that came out of Hollywood for mainstream consumption was one that did not attend to his blackness much, if at all, and he appears to have had many white allies in the business. His skills were widely lauded and his broad, rugged handsomeness could not have been missed, and yet his career would inexorably move away from the roles that made him think his time standing next to Romaine Fielding would lead to the top levels of activity in the business.

Noble Johnson in Hollywood is not exactly a tragic tale. A young man searching for opportunity found what by most any measure would have to be considered an extraordinary path which wielded notoriety, recognition of his skills and ability, creative outlet, and above-average earning power. He worked with the top talents of his field and was given some chance to make films for the mainstream, movies meant to play where the biggest monetary rewards were available. There is no record that indicates the people Noble worked with in Hollywood were unclear on his race. Noble did not have to hide or live in any fear that he would be discovered or 'outed' on the studio lots. That is not, however, the same as saying that he did not have concerns or reasons to be cautious regarding his race and how it might effect the trajectory of his chosen career and neither is it the same as saying his options were not hemmed in by the fact of his race. George later

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http://www.theproducersperspective.com/my_weblog/2014/01/tada-introducing-the-davenport-theatre.html

[445] Delbert E. Davenport, 'On the Same Trail,' GPJ Collection.

noted that Noble had not attempted to pass for white, but he had worked to manicure his contacts with other blacks so as to protect his professional status. George explained:

> he has kept away from colored a good deal because he was involved in films all the time. They knew he was colored down there – it isn't that they don't know he's colored, and they might might like you all right but they aren't particular about some of your friends. You have to keep it kind of to yourself when you're playing in that kind of a business even though you're known to be colored. You could be colored and have some real dark friends, and somebody that you wanted to associate with -- while they might want you all right – might not particularly care about your friends, you see. So my brother kept away from the mass of Negroes.[446]

Because of the general prejudice against blackness, especially that which was represented by a distance from the assumed desirability of whiteness that 'real dark' skin represented, Noble kept his distance from blackness so as to manage his career. That same prejudicial dynamic, the desire of whites to have whiteness near and at the forefront and blackness kept at bay and on the margins, meant that, as Hollywood became more and more established the gifted actor would coincidentally find himself further and further down the credits, unable to hone his craft by way of roles that attended to the human aspects that had once been at the very center of his notoriety. Noble Johnson's racial ambiguity never ceased to be influential in his casting, but, as motion picture lengths and casts enlarged, non-whiteness did not grow apace as a human presence on screen.

Noble appeared in roughly 150 films over the course of almost 40 years of acting. Despite being black he played a black man in only a very few Hollywood films, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe,* and, most famously, *King Kong*. He

[446] George P. Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p.255.

was primarily used to play a long list of other ethnic or racial types: Babylonians, Asians, Native Americans, Mexicans, East Indians, and a Cossack, among others, and, in contrast to the bland, Anglo names he took in the Lincoln films, under the kliegs of Hollywood the exoticism of his characters was born out in an impressive list of odd, sometimes willfully strange names that did and did not bear actual connections to the race or ethnicity of the character: Ratu Madri, Chake, Chatterji, Hassim, Marimba, Jeelo, Li Po, Mokuyi, and the consecutive trifecta of Ponfilo, Googomy, and Wabigoon. Noble's archetypal physicality made him an excellent representative of character types whose importance and force needed to be read quickly, so he often played characters of some authority, such as chiefs or members of a gendarme, and could be seen cast in generic roles such as The Devil, The Zombie, or simply The Thing.[447] This list of names betrays an acting career that became bogged down in bit parts dedicated to performances of a shrouded humanity seen momentarily as an explanatory embellishment in a narrative context that had little need or room for the exotic other that his roles represented.

Some of the roles mixed exoticism with brute inhumanity as in the early 1930s Noble played the henchman of sociopaths in *Murders in the Rue Morgue* and *The Most Dangerous Game*. In the former title, a stretch on the classic mystery by Edgar Allen Poe, the lead was played by Bela Lugosi who portrayed a mad scientist trying to manhandle evolution by mixing the blood of a great ape with that of a white woman who has been abducted with the help of Noble's character, Janos, the Black One.[448] Janos was an unspeaking role, which

[447] 'Noble Johnson,' *Internet Movie Data Base*, http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0425903/?ref_=fn_al_nm_1
[448] Ibid.

put the character one rung on the evolutionary scale below the characters of Renfield and Fritz, the respective leering minions of evil from Universal's A-list monster offerings *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, but still a rung above the orangutan who also takes part in the *Rue Morgue's* roof-top kidnappings. In *The Most Dangerous Game* Noble was the Cossack Ivan whose torture chamber awaited any who did not wish to be hunted like animals by the certifiable Zaroff, played by Leslie Banks.[449] In each of these turns Noble played an important supporting role that had notable screen time and in each instance his character was the muscle for a character that had been irretrievably lost from the path of humane behavior. The racial or ethnic difference of the character filled out the evil of the role and bespoke the absence of any recognition of black humanity in Hollywood fare. The centrality of some of Noble's early roles, one-dimensional as they were, were promotionally connected to his real-life humanity in ways that, were it not for his non-whiteness, he could have parlayed into more satisfying supporting or lead roles. After resigning from the Lincoln Motion Picture Company he would never again play a lead role or one that would highlight Negro humanity. He chose the path of the safer career and, given the near hopelessness of the LMPC's position, it is hard to lay blame at his feet. At the same time, it is impossible not to feel saddened and cheated by an industry or national culture that could find no room within their structures for the talents, hard work, and dreams of someone like Noble Johnson.

Noble was not paid star earnings, but he likely earned at a better than middle class rate as a contract player. At one point he was represented first by William Cohill, with ties

[449] Ibid.

back to Philadelphia, and then into the 1930s by Ben Hershfield, neither of whom, it was reported, accepted clients who earned less than $1,000 per week.[450] He and his wives, first Ruth Thornton and then Gladys Blackwell, had no children and were able to use his salary to purchase real estate in and around the Los Angeles area.[451] After having begun his real estate investments in Glendale, the area of his residence during the early 1920s, he began to purchase properties in the Hollywood area and had plans to build a court of family-friendly bungalows in that area.[452] Noble also kept busy during the down times between films by running a kennel on a two-acre tract he owned in North Hollywood where, in a role that was obviously reminiscent of his father's work with horses, he trained the dogs of the stars and readied others for following hand signs during on-screen performances.[453] The meaning of 'Famous Negro Movie Actor' was relative, as all fame is not equal, and in 1933, just after Noble's appearances in the Universal classic *King Kong*, an article appeared in the *Kennel Review* which found it natural to couple the above moniker with the subheading 'Noted Dog Trainer.' The mastery that is implied in training dogs, in running one's own business in service of wealthy patrons and large corporations, which was at the heart of Noble's kennel undertakings, resonates less forcefully when coupled with the general connotations of movie land stardom and the specific context of one actor paying another to care for his cherished pet. In short, the 'Negro' portion of the title meant that Noble's fame was connected with subordinate roles that helped to add a patina of verite to

[450] In re the names of Noble's wives, Bogle, *Bright Boulevards, Bold Dreams*, p. 29. In re Noble's real estate dealings, Notes from GPJ Collection.
[451] Untitled notes on noble Johnson, GPJ Collection.
[452] 'From Delbert E. Davenport,' GPJ Collection.
[453] Clark Irving, 'Famous Negro Movie Actor - Noted Dog Trainer,' *Kennel Review*, Dec. 1933, George P. Johnson, 'George P. Johnson: Collector of Negro Film History,' p. 94.

exotic or outlandish circumstances that were to be navigated by the headline stars of the films in which he appeared.

After the early 1930s little, if anything, was written about Noble. In 1935 Noble wrote to George that the 'picture biz was dull' and slipping from the forefront of his attentions.[454] Appearing in movies was just a job, a means to an end, and the young man who had been so filled with the hope of a new industry and the adventures of travel, all undergirded by the possibility of finding spaces in which he might find relations which would look beyond his race, gradually shifted into a more reclusive phase from which it does not appear he returned.[455]

Conclusions

Janet Wasko has noted film is 'a commodity which is produced, distributed, and exhibited under market conditions that inevitably influence the kinds of films made, who makes them, and how they are distributed to the public.'[456] This quote, which addresses the fact that the commodity of film will derive profits from being introduced into a stream of social and cultural interactions that strongly link 'who' a person is with the type of experience they can expect to have as they try to navigate production, distribution, and exhibition of their titles in the commercial film world. As the story of the Johnson's and the rise and fall of their business has shown us, who a person was, even 'what' they were in the Progressive Era could mean an almost insurmountable economic detour. As a result, if

[454] Letter from Noble Johnson to George Johnson, 12/15/1935, GPJ Collection, Box 52, Folder 20.
[455] Bogle, *Bright Boulevards, Bold Dreams*, p. 29.
[456] Janet Wasko, '*Movies and Money: Financing the American Film Industry*,' Norwood, New Jersey, Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1982, xix.

we stop to consider that part of the meaning and thrust of their business involved trying to rehabilitate the perceptions of 'who' and 'what' they were, we can fully appreciate the conundrum that they faced.

The LMPC and the Johnsons wanted to operate outside the confines of the race industry but were forced to establish and grow a business for an isolated market serving and isolated people while at the same time trying to produce imagery that could spark the imagination of whites and blacks so that the people of their market might be seen in a more accurate and positive frame which would hopefully lead to less detouring and more free interactions, including those of a commercial nature. This chapter has provided insight into how the detour leads to the dark side of the veil, how the best of intentions and efforts, including moments of successful connections and interactions with the mainstream, were not strong enough to overcome the structural and cultural impediments of de jure and de facto segregation. In addressing the 'who' and 'what' of this problem the Lincoln Motion Picture Company produced films that were meant to show blacks as they were and as they imagined they had been and would be. Through out their many business dealings and creative efforts, Noble and George Johnson tried to raise the profile of their humanity, and in the process that of all blacks, so as to begin to crack open a greater realm of opportunity. It is a testament to their character, capabilities, and will that they worked so assiduously to try every avenue they could think of in attempts to navigate an escape from the detour and it is a testament to the power and multiplicity of the ways racism uses the 'who' and 'what' to maintain the marginalization of a people trying to find ways out.

Further, though the Lincoln Motion Picture Company succumbed to the cold math of a ghettoized attempt at film-making, they were able to play an important role in furthering the establishment of a Negro vision of self that included an increased awareness of American-ness, of a black experience that was part of the nation's growth and reach around the world. In that sense, the Lincoln Company was part of a push that saw black business rise to answer the results of segregation by creating a new world, a new America wherein the humanity of blacks and their claims on the principles of their country would not go away in silence. The melding of commerce and entertainment meant an endeavor that pronounced to African Americans that blackness included middle class perspectives and lifestyles, material well-being and the pursuit thereof, business as a way of life, and the desire for success and technical mastery. The Lincoln Company was an important part of an evolving response to America which, despite being unsuccessful as a long-term profit bearing mechanism, was able put a foot down bracing for the drive to a brighter, more egalitarian future.

Chapter 4

Realization of a Human Scenario: Tales of a New Negro World, Mastery, and the Films of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company.

The Lincoln Motion Picture Company, along with the myriad companies that followed them into film production during the early-Hollywood age, did so in hopes of establishing themselves in a new industry growing out of a set of technological and marketing advancements which seemed likely to pull tremendous profits from mass, nationwide audiences. However, the recipe for financial gain was not limited to the technical aspects of filmmaking or business. The Lincoln enterprise was a marriage between commerce and art wherein the story, sometimes found in a script, but often also represented by a synopsis or scenario, was to a notable extent the substance of the product. Viewing the film meant partaking in an experience rather than the consumption of a physical good and the content of that experience was very much connected with the characters, settings, and sequenced events being depicted on the screen. Filmmaking is a storyteller's business. This endeavor in the fabulist arts required the storytellers behind early black cinema to express their own ideas and visions while also providing a product which both attended to and formed the expectations, tastes, and needs of as many members of the audience as possible. The production of these 'race films' required that a balance be struck between the familiar and the new with reaches toward the startling and never-before-seen nestled in among plot lines and topics already known and invested in by the audience.

Negative, highly demeaning stereotypes of African Americans were quite common in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America and those views were reinforced by ubiquitous displays of demeaning visual representations of African Americans which, in turn, assisted social and cultural practices that continually pushed blacks to the margins of society. Rayford Logan referred to this period as the 'nadir' of the African American experience in *The Betrayal of the Negro*, his seminal, meticulous chronicle of America's Gilded Age turn away from the promises and hopes of Reconstruction.[457] The Lincoln Motion Picture Company's entry into the film game took up the challenge of providing alternate images of blackness and the African American experience and, in order to properly consider their attempt to draw profits from the presentation of these images we must peer as closely as possible into the nature and content of their product. This chapter will closely read the synopses and still imagery of the Lincoln narrative films, along with select news releases from George's post-Lincoln entrepreneurial undertaking, the Pacific Coast News Bureau, in an attempt to fully demonstrate the ways that the life adventures and values of the Johnson family informed their storytelling work and, therefore, the overall project of addressing both the creation of a national Negro culture, including business, and the ongoing demand for the recognition of black humanity.

Identification and Film Theory

George Johnson related years later that the race film industry was not all, or even mostly, attuned to directly addressing race relations or the effects of power and difference

[457] Rayford Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York: De Capo, 1997).

over the American social, economic, cultural, and political landscapes. Decades after the race film era had passed George provided the following quote regarding the prime objectives of race film production:

> They were Negro actors but all their stories weren't [racial] as far as Negroes were concerned; some of them were just novels using a colored cast instead of white, that's all. It wasn't supposed to be a propaganda proposition, not a preachment of racial troubles. They didn't mention racial troubles. It was just showing productions of Negroes in the same types of pictures that the whites had been produced in, and Negroes had never before been produced in that type of stuff, showing the educated Negro, the doctor, the lawyer, the merchant, the rich Negro, and as he actually lived. That has always been a criticism by the Negroes of the country, that the white people based their idea of a Negro on the Stepin Fetchit [character] and the Negro himself was tired of seeing that type of picture. *He wanted to see himself as he really was*. (my emphasis)[458]

Johnson's statement initially sets out to describe the race film business as one free to present stories that sidestep race issues of power and difference drawn along lines of color. Aside from the fairly obvious point that the notion of blacks 'really' or 'actually' being *something* that could be faithfully captured on the screen is deeply fraught with troublesome complexities that makes it impossible to take those terms at face value, what is most interesting about this quote is that Johnson was unable to escape the need to address the way that 'white people' saw blacks and the ways that such impinged on the ability of blacks to enjoy images of blacks that were more representative of the pictures they had of themselves (and to see others seeing them as they felt they really were).

[458] George P. Johnson, *Collector of Negro Film History*, transcript of oral history, 161, Tape IV, Side 2, 10/17/67. Regents of the University of California, 1970.

Further, the task of correcting the view generally held of blacks and blackness is expressed in national terms, which necessarily begins to take us in the direction of Dubois' doubleness and what it meant to be branded as black and to then try to develop one's humanity, the black community's humanity, in America. The power and cultural politics of race could not be set aside even by films made for blacks that made no explicit or pointed mention of race while trying to simply depict blacks living 'in society and in business offices and in some of the homes,' which is to say in social and material circumstance that would not be considered as notable in mainstream society.[459]

Though Johnson wished in those latter day discussions to separate race films from the realms of propaganda and other efforts to roil troubling racial issues, and while one can see in this a desire among at least some blacks to rise above and move beyond race and blackness, in a society where 'normal' meant 'white' and the depiction of black bodies playing out professional roles in middle class domesticity deserved some special mention as ground-breaking, the reach for universality, for a visual statement indicating that blacks 'lived and operated just the same as a white man' and was differentiated only by the 'color of his skin' has to be seen as a response to the delimitations of racialized stratifications of power. A look at identification in film, the adhesiveness of the connection between the self and other, will help to clarify the difficulty that George had in explaining how race films were not about race while also at the same time falling into discussions of race and the movies made to manage black expectations surrounding that issue.

[459] Ibid, 139.

Jane Gaines has provided an excellent distillation of film theory contemplations regarding the self, others, and identification in an effort the explain her idea that the mechanisms of film involve an 'othering machine,' which is to say the manner in which film presents difference and sameness on screen and thereby engages the audience member in the process of establishing a self by viewing the other.[460] Gaines uses the Lacanian Gaze, with updates from bell hooks, to set up her ideas regarding the ways that race films dealt with audience identification and on-screen images.[461] Jacques Lacan and his far-reaching returns to Freudian psychoanalytical approaches to self and other expounded upon the idea of the Gaze, the discomfiting sensation of slipping from the controlling position of watching the other to the less assured position of being watched by another subjectivity. The self is objectified in this relationship of visions and the fundamental inability to simply hold one's position as a matter of personal desire shakes the person who falls under the Gaze.[462] The Gaze is not the action of seeing. Rather, it is an interrelation of power as the other is able to recast the subject's sense of self, something that is no doubt abetted by the context in which the subject understands itself to reside.

The concept of the Gaze can be applied to the power relations existent between black and white America and the ways that the desires and judgments of whites affected the sense of self of blacks. The above lament noted by George Johnson when discussing the fatigue of blacks who had to constantly deal with the ideas carried by the images that

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[460] Jane Gaines, *Fire & Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 79-90.
[461] Ibid.
[462] Jacques Lacan, Alan Sheridan. (trans.), Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.), *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Norton, 1977).

whites had of blacks is an example of the discomfiting position of being the White Gaze. Gaines pointed to Manthia Diawara's handling of the uproar the black community expressed upon the release of *Birth of a Nation* as an example of what she called 'hegemonic endangerment,' which involved the experience of black audiences being made uncomfortable and irritated by the film's insistence that, in giving themselves over to the viewing pleasures of the film, they identify with the Ku Klux Klan and against the film's characters of color.[463] In this instance the screen reflected not what the black audiences wanted, which was a 'completeness' assisted by the reflection of images of blackness which would allow them to recognize themselves on screen, but instead imagery which denigrated blackness for the purpose of a different set of desires, which is to say the putative desires of a white audience which shared the racist values being depicted. In the depths of this argument, which is compelling, there is the intimation that a Gaze can be represented in a directed set of actions which, captured on film, can then be projected onto a screen which bounces the images back to the viewer who then suffered the discomfort and displacement of being under that Gaze. This is an experience of the cinema that reverberates from not only the on-screen activity, but the reception of the screen's information by the entire audience, including all viewings in all imagined or understood screenings, an experience that ripples from the screen with the message of an entire culture.

The concept of the Gaze has proliferated over the decades and it has been noted that the position of the objectified in the Gaze relationship is not without its own gazing

[463] Gaines, *Fire & Desire*, p. 82.

abilities. Bell hooks has riffed on the Oppositional Gaze as a way of addressing the black experience of watching images that reflect the White Gaze, which is to say representations of blackness produced and displayed for the pleasure of whites.[464] Hooks provided examples from her personal experience of watching television shows like *Amos 'n' Andy*, bloated with stereotypes of blacks as ineffectual buffoons, and explained that, while there was humor and enjoyment to be taken from such viewings, she was also always able to critique the images because 'spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see.'[465] hooks is noting that blacks construct their own world view while processing the White Gaze and can accept or reject absorbing all or parts of any narrative presented to them. She refers to Diawara's work in *Black British Cinema* and focuses in on his interest in instances of 'rupture' where the spectator resists or splits from 'complete identification with the film's discourse.'[466] The viewer becomes active here and, no longer hemmed in by objectivity, answers the power relations implicit in the images which otherwise cause disengagement. The opposite of rupture might be thought of as immersion, the sympathetic acceptance of the on-screen world and its logics or emotions in a way that allows the viewer to receive the film's perspective as the viewer's own.

Lacan's Gaze has spurred an alternative conception of multiple points of interface, the Matrixial Gaze, which, as stated by Griselda Pollock, allows us to interact across the space between subject and object so as to get beyond the 'notion of the discrete and singular

[464] bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," from *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, ((1992) 2003), 94–105.
[465] Ibid., p. 95.
[466] Ibid.

subject formed by the establishment of the boundaries that distinguish it from an oceanic or undifferentiated otherness of the world.'[467] In other words, the Matrixial treatment of the gaze, which Couze Venn has indicated moves the gaze into realms that erupt from all of the senses, affords an opportunity to break down or rise above the borders of differentiation. [468] The matrixial is a set of sensory relations that build toward completeness rather than toward the power relations of differentiation. Looking and seeing are a central part of the navigation of the world, obviously, and desire can flow in numerous directions and answer or conflict with alternate desires. Film can service both the viewer's desire to be different and to be the same, though it is not necessarily easy to control the boundary.

Hooks' need to reply to the White Gaze reminds us of DuBois and the gaze which he mentions in connection with his initial notice of the feeling of doubleness. We can think of that set of relations as a gaze which recognizes certain nationalized values such as egalitarianism or the rights of man while also looking upon blackness as an effective disqualifier: The White American Gaze. This gaze comes out of competing values some number of which stem from a source that seems to look at both the white and the black even as they look at each other and their selves. The exampled white from the first pages of *The Souls of Black Folk* who hems and haws at DuBois before blurting out that he knows 'an excellent colored man' is really, according to DuBois, trying to get at and around the

[467] Griselda Pollock, "Thinking the Feminine: Aesthetic Practice as Introduction to Bracha Ettinger and the Concepts of Matrix and Metamorphosis," *Theory, Culture, & Society*, February 2004, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 5-65.
[468] Couze Venn, "Post-Lacanian Affective Economy, Being-in-the-word, and the Critique of the Present: Lessons from Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger," *Theory, Culture, & Society* February 2004, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 149–158.

odd African American experience of 'being a problem,' of being a locus for the play of competing values and world views.[469] The suggestion is that, though there is a desire on the white's part to communicate a connection or understanding to the black, and though he recognizes that there is a problem of place for blacks, he cannot actually make out who or of what the black person and experience consists. The fact that the white man cannot simply look upon DuBois and be satisfied with the scene before him suggests the whisper of a greater authority, perhaps the professed ideals of his nation, which require him to try to put words on the issue.

DuBois, who indicated that he generally said nothing in return to inquiries of problemhood, finally responded with *Souls*, a telling of stories that recount the rhythms and pronunciations of black life in order to offer truer visions of black humanity, and he thereby hoped to petition his white and black audience's connections to higher human values of recognition and inclusion. DuBois moved to shrink the otherness of blacks as perceived by whites while also giving blacks a window through which they could re-see themselves. This was not just a critique of white supremacy and the violence it wreaked on higher values and black bodies alike, it was a move toward repair via being seen more completely and less problematically. *The Souls of Black Folk* seems to presuppose spaces within which connections can be made and many points of potential relation or understanding worked toward. DuBois therefore drew the reader's look and their imaginative powers to various cultural products and experiences connected with blackness.

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[469] W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, ((1903) 1996), pp. 3-4.

These descriptions of the ways that looking relations are involved with identity formation and maintenance repeatedly bring us around to pictures of singularity hiding multiplicity, incompleteness and quests for wholeness, the contest over power and freedom, and a pervasive duality that refuses to allow the self and other to function as permanently separate positions. Gaines theorizes that the persistent proximity of the self and other, of difference and sameness, assists film as an 'othering machine' to present imagery that mirrors even as it others, which is to say that imagining, or even acting out, a transformation from self to a different version of the self can be part of the pleasure of watching film.[470] The self, being an object of knowledge, can be a source of instability or comfort and there is a need to fix the self in one's own view while also conversely steeling against being over-determined or fixed by power relations that see and do not see, that render one surveilled and yet ignored. There is a need in the self for call and response and a need to sever and repair. The self's ability to build and re-build the self through engaging or denying the other is a core part of the human experience of building self and the sense of one's self in relation to others. To build identity requires engagement with the other and it is therefore to one degree or another a social and cultural chain of events. The race cinema that the Lincoln Motion Picture Company would be instrumental in birthing a black cinema that would seek to offset the discomforts noted above by Diawara and this would be done via the presentation of scenarios, complexes of social and cultural information played out on screen and signaling a new world of realities and possibilities.

African Americans came to 'race cinema' with developed desires to see black bodies

[470] Gaines, *Fire & Desire*, pp. 86-87.

represented in ways that reflected how they experienced themselves and other blacks, to be enveloped and validated by the presentation of images that offered the familiar in a positive light. The pleasures derived from being catered to, from having one's tastes and interests pursued in acknowledgement of those desires and the buying power lying in wait mingled with on-screen visual markers that triggered memories or anticipations of personal, family, and community experiences. The scene of black audiences watching the film and each other watching begins to give us a hint of the matrixial way that the Black Gaze was tweaked and satisfied by the spectacle of early race film exhibitions. We must be careful not to view this in triumphal terms as not only did these efforts falter financially, as we have seen, but the initial sense of progress and assertion could experience 'rupture' as the race film industry struggled to keep pace with the technological advancements of the era, a battle whose losses could lead to responses such as those noted by Thomas Cripps who wrote that 'the black middle class found their films ridiculous in their imitation of white norms of behavior while many poorer blacks must have strained unsuccessfully for a glimpse of themselves.'[471] Nonetheless, as we have seen in the prior chapters, these events, including the business aspect of the presentations, were often treated as verifications black progress and expectations of uplift and ongoing improvement, showing out product created in one sector and then distributed and viewed across a nation more and more connected.

Our mirroring capacity allows us to follow scenario while interpreting context, subtext, intent, and the acting out of the full gamut of human emotions. Michael Taussig

[471] Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, ((1997) 1993), pp. 5-6.

has noted that this deeply human ability to mime, the mimetic faculty, as he puts it, is a 'capacity to Other,' to become something else.[472] In rummaging through Walter Benjamin's ideas regarding the power of mimetic machines such as the tandem of the motion picture camera and projector, Taussig noted that the reproductive aspects of those machines was a sort of 'discovery of an optical unconscious, opening up new possibilities for exploring reality and providing means for changing culture and society along with those possibilities.'[473] Film is here being discussed as a template for new understandings of position in reality, especially in reference to self and other.

Progressive Era African Americans watching images of blackness, or the absence thereof, presented for the viewing pleasure and edification of whites were well attuned to the fact that the negative images and stereotypes that dominated the mainstream media's public presentations of blackness were, as hooks puts it, 'a system of knowledge and power reproducing and maintaining white supremacy.'[474] The viewing discomforts and dissatisfactions endured by blacks arose from an awareness that the treatment of blackness in most movies reflected widespread cultural perspectives that were loathe to tolerate on- or off-screen images of blacks that fell outside of social and cultural hierarchies which required black subordination to and separation from whiteness. Films presenting blacks enjoying material success, various manners of mastery, and other middle class privileges brought fantasies to life but also assuaged those parts of the black self image that felt wronged and slandered by the White Gaze. The Johnsons knew that

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[472] Taussig, Michael. *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 19.
[473] Ibid., p. 23.
[474] belle hooks, 'The Oppositional Gaze,' p. 96.

there was a hunger in the black community for the mirroring of positive black images and the opportunity to be immersed in a different cultural chemistry wherein blackness had a fuller run of its humanity.

The Films of the LMPC

Many of the films of the early silent era have been lost and can no longer be seen as they were once presented. The films of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company no longer exist, lost to the road shows and a fire at the warehouse where they were housed.[475] There is a film of a projection of a single reel of the last title, *By Right of Birth*, but little else. For the most part, the imagery can only be seen in stills shot at the time of filming, but likely framed outside the flow of the actual shoot, and in some of the promotional ephemera. Any attempt to adequately capture the viewing experience of these films is necessarily hampered to a profound degree by this inability to see the intended motion of these pictures. Our discussion of the Lincoln films will not address much in the way of the technical aspects of the titles. Nonetheless, there is value to be culled from the associated photos that have survived, which can help us flesh out the scenarios or synopses that we must rely upon when closely considering the Lincoln films. The necessity of working with scenarios is not an admission of some great poverty of information. While scenario is most commonly recognized as a term referring to pre-production connected with film, television, stage plays, and even radio, which is to say the planning of a presentation of a particular storyline to an audience, it should be kept in mind that the term may also be applied to any attempt to relate a chain of events which involve specified persons, occur in

[475] George P. Johnson, *Collector of Negro Film History*,

a particular setting or settings, and that span a more or less recognized time frame.[476] Scenario is at the core of the human endeavor of tracking our experiences and observations in time and space. Film is but one of the methods we have developed for pursuing this fundamental epistemological task and scenario is key to the audiences ability to access and often repurposed the context of the film so as to undertake situation analysis and comparisons between the screen action and real life.

Realization of a Negro's Ambition: Material Well-Being and the Desire to Be Recognized

The first film released by the Lincoln Motion Picture Company was *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition* (1916), a two-reel title which tracked the arc of a young black man's pursuit of a classic iteration of the American Dream, upward financial mobility and a resultant ability to provide for a family which stakes the bloodline's future. Noble Johnson starred as James Burton who, recently graduated from Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, returns to his family's homestead only to quickly arrive at the conclusion that his father's farm does not offer him an adequate opportunity to develop the skills connected with his degree in civil engineering. Burton says goodbye to his family and the hometown romantic interest, Mary Hayden, and heads west to California where he applies for a position with an oil company. The bid for employment is summarily denied due to his 'nationality' and he is seen off. Walking away in dejection he sees a two-horse rig running

[476] Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/scenario

uncontrolled and, subduing the animals, discovers that he has also fortuitously secured the safety of a white woman, the daughter of the owner of the oil company that had just pushed him away. The owner learns of Burton's heroism and, apprised of his educational background, offers the young man a job leading an oil expedition. Months of experience on the job eventually bring to mind the limestone and shale of his father's farm. He begins to suspect the farm sits on mineral resources that could be quite valuable. Burton shares his surmise with the owner who stakes him on an expeditionary claim. Upon once more returning to his hometown he becomes embroiled in a tangle of romantic cross purposes as George and Doris Babbit, the son and daughter of a well-to-do, property-owning negro, each respectively have intentions for Burton and Mary, though the engineer has no special care for Doris and Mary is similarly disinclined toward George. Mary is a stenographer in a local business office and is seen by George in a compromising position that, in a fit of spurned pique, he uses to scandalize the young woman. Doris takes advantage and tells Burton of Mary's indiscretion when James comes to contract with the elder Babbit so that testing can be done on the latter's farm. The Babbits then tell all of the others in their social circle and Mary is subsequently ostracized at an affair held by the Babbit's in Burton's honor. James does not take Mary's shaming to heart as, after striking oil and becoming financially 'independent,' he visits the office in which she works in order to carry out the business of buying a city home and, upon seeing his sweetheart, proposes marriage. Mary accepts. The film ends with a flash forward to a future wherein James is at

home with family and a 'nice country to live in and nice people to live and enjoy it with him.'[477]

Any discussion of the first few Lincoln films, including *Realization*, must begin with what had to be the strongest visual component, the sight of the picture's star, Noble Johnson. Though we do not have any surviving footage of his work on the Lincoln titles, we can point to his photographs and many appearances in Hollywood productions when referring to his on-screen presence and, as noted in prior chapters, Johnson was a well-built man of over six feet, solidly built with a fairly broad face framing a square, dimpled jaw. His visage was easy to pick up on the screen and his movements, sure and energetic, presented a classic cut of virile masculinity. It is hard to imagine that any other character could have matched his watchability and the first Lincoln films bore the mark of his powerful male aura. Indeed, *Realization* is a profoundly male-oriented outing for which Noble's physical attributes were perfect. The positive action took place almost exclusively in oil fields and business offices, realms that were generally assumed to be the default purview of men, and the most important plot twist grows directly out of Burton's decisive masculine impulse.

The brief relationship that arises between the owner of the oil fields and Johnson's Burton is reminiscent of Noble's comments about Lubin and his hopeful read of Lubin's willingness to impart his knowledge of the movie-making industry, a scenario which bears the marks of a paternalistic relationship wherein the son takes the position of torch-bearer of the filial line, a move made possible by the father passing on the knowledge of

[477] 'Synopsis: Realization of a Negro's Ambition.' Lincoln Motion Picture Company, Microfilm, p. 354a, Reel 7.

power in a paternalist society. The presentation of females in this film, and one might argue in the lives of the Lincoln men, is almost wholly a matter of providing for the Male Gaze, the term used in Laura's ground-breaking application of Lacan's theory to the imbalance of power between the genders.[478] Mulvey asserted that the imagery of mainstream, Hollywood output was a product created from and given to representations of male desires which objectified women for the purpose of male pleasure. The pleasure for males was not simply sexual as the overall thrust of a given film's story arc involved a variety of male-oriented pursuits wherein the female was in place simply to act as impetus or goal for the sequence of events in the male scenario. In *Realization* the women are on hand primarily to fill the needs of the protagonist's plans for a genetic legacy or the role of the distressed damsel in need of a masculine restoration of order. Burton acquires his future wife in the same practical moment that he purchases a home and the proposal cements Burton's adherence to middle class values demanding a nuclear family. This union also works to demonstrate that Burton was a man who could not be easily duped by scurrilous, low-grade rumormongering, a man who was able to stand on his own apart from the crowd. Mary's feminine vulnerability is rescued from the wilderness of outcast status by a dramatically correct read on her true personality and the female character's duty as a foil for reflections of Burton's worthiness as head of household is completed.

The Lincoln films clearly nodded to some of the black uplift movement's pet projects such as the material advancement of blacks by way of education and lifestyles erected around middle class mores holding in high esteem sober assessments and hard work.

[478] Mulvey, Laura, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' *Screen*, Vol. 16, No. 3, Autumn 1975, pp. 6-18.

Realization is not a rags-to-riches story but instead presents a cast of characters that move through a world of black property ownership, thriving businesses, and achievements in higher education. Burton's trek to the west is a search for opportunity, so cherished by the era's blacks as a symbol of America's promise, but opportunity is in this instance conceived of as a sort of search for recognition as much as it is a matter of being given a chance to succeed. Opportunity is pried from the hands of fate by masculinity when Burton brings the runaway horses to heel and one of the central themes of the Lincoln oeuvre is revealed: mastery of the earth and its riches.

As was discussed earlier, the control over the horse's great strength and work product was a key indicator of the status and power of the owner and, in that way, a source of recognition for the trainer where that individual was not an owner. When Burton takes the runaway team in hand he demonstrates raw strength and a daring will ready to take risks to exert control and guidance over the natural world and its trove of resources, including the horse's valuable though potentially dangerous force. The audiences across the country would have been familiar with the scenario of a heroic leap onto a runaway horse team and seeing a black character educated as an engineer would have suggested that the lessons of the farm could extend to other venues and assist in bringing order from chaos. This show of mastery undergirds Burton's educational bona fides and places the encounter with the ownership class on a different footing.

The owner is, it seems assumed, in his position as the result of similar efforts to reap the earth's largesse. We should remind ourselves of the extractive pursuits of Johnson family when they were in Colorado grinding the earth for gold. That desire to uncover a

lode of valuable minerals or strike into and capture hidden lakes of oil takes us to the root the unending task of taking from nature the resources and energy necessary for man's survival and the hope of surpluses (profit) that pad for the future. The suddenness of such attainments allows the actor to make leaps up the socio-economic ladder and hints at impatience with the overall system's ability to provide opportunities for advancement. The face-to-face meeting between the budding engineer and the owner of the oil field is facilitated by the rescue of the owner's daughter, an unintended benefit of Burton's thrilling exploit that turns out to be akin to hitting the mother lode.

The rescue of the white flower of femininity by an educated man of the race immediately sets *Realization* out as a piece which challenges the presentation of black masculinity in Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. In Birth the horses serve the hooded Ku Klux raiders as they race to defend a central female character, Flora, from Gus, the black brute who's animalistic desires for her hand lead her to fall or jump from a cliff. Gus is an officer in a Reconstruction force that oversees the institution of a world chaotically turned upside down by the elevation of blacks to citizenship and positions of power over southern whites. Flora's death comes without being touched in any harmful way by Gus.[479] Just the hint of his interest in her, the mere thought of having the social boundaries between southern white femininity and black masculinity is enough to make her choose plummeting to her demise and that act of self-sacrifice in the name of a putatively higher ideal of race separateness portends the ultimate resuscitation of southern civilization.

[479] Basic plot points explaining Birth are ubiquitous, in this case taken from Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's the Birth of a Nation: A History of "The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Order begins to be restored to the preferred worldview of *Birth of a Nation* when Gus is hunted down by Klansmen astride their horses and lynched. The subjugation of blacks to maintain civilization and the rooting out of the evil of any breaches in the veil that lies between black and white is the primary social take away from *Birth* and such stood very much in opposition to *Realization's* presentation of a black male who restores order by executing an exciting on-screen rescue.

We should note that there is no whiff of sexual interest between the owner's daughter and Burton. Further, the film's setting is bi-furcated into a world where blacks and whites interact and a world in which they do not. This segregation is reminiscent of Booker T. Washington's 1895 assurance to whites that the two races could be as separated as the splayed fingers of the hand and yet work together to make the hand functional.[480] *Realization's* clear indication of a lack of interest in promoting 'social equality,' that euphemism for miscegenation, mixes with the portrayal of black masculinity as a partner in the maintenance of order and acts as a repudiation of the logics underpinning the violent, extra-legal enforcement of the bounds between the races. However, *Realization* does not merely leave the characters representing the two races as subject and other, as social creatures with no social interactions, and it is the social aspect of their coming together that offers up the mother lode opportunity for Burton and gives us the best insight into the world that Noble Johnson wanted to provide for the audience.

[480] Booker T. Washington, 'Atlanta Compromise Speech, 1895' in Larry Schweikart, Dave, Dougherty, and Michael Allen, eds. , *The Patriot's History Reader: Essential Documents for Every American* (New York: Sentinel, 2011), Chpt. 27.

The key to Burton getting a job is the owner's recognition of the young black man's character and that occurs because the saving of the owner's daughter provides access to an authority that trumps race and racism.[481] Aside from the synopsis' interesting choice of 'nationality' to represent Burton's blackness, an elision of the term 'race' which may have been part of a title card and meant to communicate a certain embarrassment or raw ignorance on the part of the person rebuffing Burton's inquiry into employment, the divide between the races and the prospect of white rejections of blackness are quickly put to the side by the owner's gratitude. We should pay this dynamic some attention. This thankfulness established a human window through which the owner sees Burton as a man first and foremost. It must be assumed that the other hands assisting on the oil rig would not have had to jump from a horse running at full speed to an uncontrolled team before being seen as someone whose education made them suitable for the position of exploratory lead. As a black man Burton had to first pierce the veil so that his person could be more fully seen. The owner's look does not see Burton as Burton sees himself and wishes to be seen until racialized looking is replaced by an ability to see blackness but to consider it as less than controlling in comparison to expertise, achievement, and mastery over the earth and its laws of physics.

[481] The assumption here is that the owner of the oil business is white, something which is not specified in the synopsis but seems a reasonable reading of the overall circumstance presented in the story. Further, this would fit with many of the experiences the Johnsons had with advancement and the many instances wherein plot points in Lincoln Films seem to reference the actual experiences of the brothers. Some other writers have made this same assumption, e.g., Mark Reid in his *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1993), p 9.

The timely rescue of a powerful, wealthy man, or an endangered member of his family, by a needy but courageous member of society's underclass has often been used in stories to rationalize a life-changing introduction between the well off and the less well-off. This is a fantasy of being thrust into a situation wherein a person of means is able to see one as one wishes oneself to be seen, a fantasy wherein divisions marking differing abilities to effect power relations between the parties are back seated by the savior's valor and open thankfulness of the one being saved. It is almost certain that Noble Johnson and portions of his audiences were aware of Horatio Alger Jr.'s popular series of late 19th century 'white uplift' novels formulaically recounting stories of young men who made their way from difficult economic circumstances, even poverty, to solid middle class lives of security and admirable status by way of hard work, applied skill, and the patronage of an older, monied man. Almost invariably this patronage was the profitable fallout of a dramatic circumstance wherein the plucky but financially wanting protagonist effects a rescue of the man of money, or a member of his family, from some immediate threat and thereby displays an exemplary character which is then noticed by the man of wealth.[482] It is important to mention that Alger would often attribute the character of the protagonist to the implements or activities of the saving motion, as in stating that the swimming was strong or the knife sure and quick, which created a sense of the protagonist's ability to project his personality into the world.[483]

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[482] Carol Nackenoff, *The Fictional Republic: Horatio Alger and American Political Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) p. 4.

[483] One example of the protagonist as strong swimmer comes in Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick* (Bolobill, 1868 (2010)), p. 173 ;

The wealthy man and the youngster bridge class divisions and power differentials which usually preclude opportunities for one to know the other and suddenly find themselves face-to-face, scanning each other's visages for points of recognition. The youngster's character and capability decisively win the crucial moment. The powerless is transformed in the mind of the master class and vice versa so that, when the danger has been averted and the greater context of societal divisions might be expected to reassert, a shared humanity instead arises between the two actors and a partnership blooms. The danger and the immediacy of the remedial action absolve the hero of any ulterior motives and the need to protect any advantage of imbalances of power seems to dissolve into a paternal relationship which offers access to a system which is assumed to be desirable and justified. The other's recognition begins to make a different world, a different scenario that the formerly powerless subject will begin to inhabit, a world the subject's actions and very nature effects in ways that the subject desires.

In the Alger stories and *Realization* the man of means must be read as returning to his relative position of power as soon as the danger passes and it is in to his world that the savior passes, which is to say that neither the Alger stories nor the Lincoln film attempted an overarching critique of the structural or systemic economic dynamics causing the imbalances. Rather, the dream of mobility and being seen as one sees, knows, and imagines oneself is fulfilled by a partnership, by an invitation to participate according to ability and preparation judged according to prevailing, preferred perspectives overseen by the dominant position. In *Realization* the White Gaze is satisfied by and open to the man of color, but that ruling party perspective is still the dominant perspective at all times. The

exceptional black man is then met by an exceptional white man to create an exceptional, even unlikely circumstance. The talented tenth meets the fair-minded (albeit transformed by gratitude) tenth and the black fantasy or desire of having a white audience that sees blacks as they see themselves or wish to be seen is played out. The young engineer is brought into the fold and allowed a subjectivity with means and access. Race is transcended on an ad hoc basis and a space for maneuvering is created with the implicit acceptance of class stratifications and attendant power imbalances. When Burton is given the opportunity to take over a team of subordinates that one would assume to be white, access to the class system is implied even as stratifications due to race are turned upside down.

Burton comes into the situation having spent time getting an education so he can perform if given an opportunity and he leaves his initial rejection disappointed. These points indicate that the character had some expectations of being able to use his skills in situations that included white control, a belief in finding operational spaces that crossed racial lines. Burton's unhappiness with rejection was not, however, described as involving surprise or shock, and the audience would have understood the rejection based on race as a widespread problem endemic to the African American experience in both the on- and off-screen worlds as opposed to an isolated incident. Racism is defeated by the dynamics of a universal humanity and a subsequent partnering with whiteness. This suggests that race and racism are seen as mechanisms interfering or reducing the available relational options for blackness, most notably business relations. While the audience was no doubt made up of members of the black community who had a wide range of experience with

white money and authority and would not have widely assumed that the *Realization's* interracial moment could be regularly duplicated in real life, as Anna Everett has noted regarding the movie-going take away of southern transplants and established northern blacks in urban enclaves around the county, 'both classes were seeking useful clues to effect their respective sociopolitical transformations' and can be thought of as using the film to assist in imagining new vistas.[484]

Herman Gray has identified three types of on-screen televised representations of blackness which address the experience of being black in America: assimilationist, pluralist, and multi-culturally diverse.[485] Gray describes assimilationist approaches as treating race as mostly invisible or non-effectual while privileging individualism so as to establish inter-racial similarity and universalism. Assimilationist or integrationist perspectives stage disharmony and power differentials as conflicts or complications which play out as face-to-face anomalies which are to be smoothed over by returns to shared, even universal values and recognitions. Actual cultural differences are not given much run and the dominant, preferred position is left to invisibly control the dialogue. The Pluralist position is one which allows some cultural difference to arise but only within parallel universes wherein blacks live in a 'separate but equal' world involving no whites, though the White Gaze and middle class assumptions continue to drive the action and aspirations of the characters. The Multi-cultural perspective also finds itself moved by middle class values but allows for a much more varied and potentially contentious approach

[484] Anna Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 40-41.
[485] Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 84-91.

representing blackness and the struggle to fit into America, which is to say that black cultural formations and experiences are given room to explore multiple cultural fronts within the race's experience and differences are not simply smoothed over or treated as anomaly.[486]

Gray's ideas about how constructions of on-screen blackness speak to the black effort to find place in America and to see and be seen in terms that give the African American perspective a wider field of play. When he notes that the Multi-cultural approach often contains elements of the assimilationist and pluralist strategies he hints at a sort of dialectical, evolutionary fight to find place in America that is tremendously varied and even contradictory or ambivalent. We can see elements of the assimilationist and pluralist approaches in *Realization*, the yearning to be seen by the White Gaze in a manner that recognizes black excellence, even the more universal quality of black humanity, and then a capitulation to social realities that return blackness to a separate but alluringly equal world of material well-being and social dramas devoid of poverty and class struggle. The rugged individualism of Burton, so prominent in the atmosphere into which the film was released, was announced in the title as, in contrast to a film like *The Birth of a Race*, *Realization* sets out to tell one man's story, *a* negro's path to the attainment of modest, grounded ambitions to be a participant and partner in the American experiment. The point of entry into the realms of power and economic advancement are watched over by another individual and the problem of race is worked out on a face-to-face basis. The Lincoln Motion Picture Company was also trying to present a construction of blackness that did

[486] Ibid.

vary and complicate the issue of race and power from the perspective of blacks, especially those of the middle class. In that sense, *Realization* was to a limited degree also multi-cultural in content, though, in the context of the earliest iterations of the black desires being discussed and the temporal constraints of a two-reel film, truly multi-cultural dynamics were not explicit.

The move to begin family life does not begin until Burton's material circumstance is independently stable and without need of any communal assistance, another reflection of the centrality of middle class mores and the Lincoln company's intent to demonstrate blackness as able and primed to take up positions of citizenship without being a burden. The film presents an almost pastoral ending, jumping to a future wherein the audience was given a picture of what constituted the fulfillment of the protagonist's ambitions. The intervening years are unspecified, though the closing image of the pater familias living in material comfort surrounded by 'nice people' who share his well being frames those years as a series of reinforcements of success. Not unlike the closing scenarios found in Alger's books, this last glimpse of Burton's tale depicts a notably modest set of middle class dreams fulfilled by the accomplishment of solid, but unspectacular, material security and a family and social life removed from the fray. Indeed, it would seem that the goal of mastering the earth's creatures and physical dynamics, of traversing the land and extracting its mineral largesse was setting up a circumstance wherein Burton could create the spaces necessary for a future of relaxed domestic comfort. The payoff for a life's worth of risk taking, experimentation, thrills and spills is not equaling or outpacing the owner's position and power. The iniquities of the race game are not challenged and defeated in a

direct fashion. Instead, race is defeated on a personal basis and that solitary victory makes possible the achievement of a relatively self-contained set of goals. This adherence to the modest prudence of idealized middle class living further foregrounds the image of blacks as citizens and participants ready for recognition as such.

The Realization of a Negro's Ambition was a short piece of celluloid packed with meaning for the ongoing black struggle to rehabilitate blackness, to be seen as blacks saw themselves, and to set out a vision of the humanity of people of color. The multiplicity of strategies utilized by blacks can be seen in the film's assimilationist and pluralist approaches as well as in the emphasis on mastery over the natural world, mastery over the self through education, and the establishment of black social arenas that reflected assumptions of rightful belonging and readiness for citizenship. It appears that it was difficult for the creators of the scenario to imagine a black world that did not have to answer to and keep in mind the pressures, perspectives, and power of the white world. The need to answer the white vision of blackness with that of blacks evinces a deeply seeded need to have a fair audience with whites even as there was a simultaneous desire to develop as humans away from whites or inter-racial relations. The first Lincoln title shows blacks as having some connections or similarities with whites, especially where materialist endeavors are concerned, but it would be too simple to say, as George Johnson suggested, that the story was just black bodies living like whites. In addressing such issues *Realization* spoke to the aspirations of blacks to see and imagine others seeing and recognizing images that gave hope of or verified the race's population of materially firm,

middle class families who carried on lives that met the professed requirements of citizenship.

The Trooper of Troop K: Citizen Soldier and the Path to Manhood

This assertion of the suitability and value of black citizenship was made explicit in the second Lincoln film, the three-reel *The Trooper of Troop K*, also 1916, which built a romantic subplot in support of a 'realistic' production of the Battle of Carrizal which had been fought between U.S. troops, including the black Troop K of the 10th cavalry, and Mexican troops during General John Pershing's Pancho Villa Expedition.[487] Though the military had been sent by President Woodrow Wilson on a mission to confront Pancho Villa's troops, who had crossed over the border to America on numerous occasions so as to raid for supplies and weapons, the Battle of Carrizal was fought between the Americans and National fighters under Venustiano Carranza, who was also opposed to Villa. The Americans wished to pass through a town held by the Carrancistas but were not granted the permission to do so and a firefight broke out when the senior U.S. officer insisted that his men carry on through the town. The Mexican position was fortified by machine guns and the vastly outnumbered American troops ended up being flanked and dispersed. Ten American soldiers were killed and twenty-four taken prisoner while twenty-four Mexicans lost their lives. Captain Boyd, the senior officer, was killed in action and the remaining captain, Lewis Morey, escaped after injury with the help of several black soldiers.[488] That

[487] Synopsis of *The Trooper of Troop K*, Microfilm, GPJ Collection; James P. Finley, 'Buffalo Soldiers at Huachuca: The Battle of Carrizal,' *Huachuca Illustrated*, Issue 1, 1993.
[488] Finley, Ibid.

escape and other reported instances of fortitude under fire shown by the black soldiers formed the spine of *The Trooper of Troop K*.

Noble Johnson starred as 'Shiftless Joe,' a man who had little in the way of material belongings and, showing a lack of polish, was not well kept in appearance. Clara, the female love interest, begins to take an interest in Joe after he demonstrates the goodness of his heart by purchasing her flowers with the last of his money. Clara hails from a respectable family and repays his profligate kindness with admonishments regarding his ability to better his situation. He attempts to take work but proves to be incompetent. She then arrives at the belief that a spell in the military will bring needed discipline to his life. He enlists and ends up in Troop K of the 10th Calvary where, despite his initial fecklessness, his exceptional care of his horse leads him to a strong relationship with his white captain.[489] It is Joe who saves the captain during the battle of Carrizal while disposing of several Mexican gunmen during a rousing getaway on horseback.[490] Upon returning to his home he is met by Clara and embraced as word of his heroic deeds has preceded him via newspaper articles. Clara spurns another dandyish suitor known for buying flashy clothes with money his mother has made as a launderette. Joe wins Clara's affections.

As in *Realization*, the female lead in *Trooper*, played by Beulah Hall, is not developed as a character or personality for her own sake, but is instead the main character's impetus for dramatic action and change over the course of the film. Still, her edifying encouragements made her a conduit of middle class values and the possessor of some

[489] 'The Trooper of Co. K,' Chicago Defender, October 14, 1916, p.4.
[490] 'Trooper Scores', GPJ Collection, Reel 7 Microfilm, p.342a.

agency that unquestionably affect the outcome of the film. The reclamation of black manhood via a feminine domesticity is much more pronounced here than in *Realization*. This romantic bit of fluff was described before one of the film's St. Louis showings as a 'Pathetic but humorous account,' which likely means the romance and the protagonist's bumbling about was used to inject some humor into otherwise familiar, potentially shrill calls for uplift.[491] African Americans have fought in every American war and that history was in the early 20th century part of calls from the black community for recognition and better treatment from whites. The prospects of the journey to manhood in the name of home and country, of returning from battle as a person ready to take up the mantle of a fully fledged head of household, that all-important building block of society, makes up both a tale of self mastery and one of patriotic zeal meant to show audiences black heroism in conflicts with forces whose foreign aspect all the more highlighted the worthiness for citizenship and American-ness of the black fighters.

The horseback rescue of a vulnerable, though otherwise 'ranking' white person again marks passage into a new state of being for the protagonist, a new incarnation of the self, and, as in *Realization*, the new knowledge is then transported back to the home front. In that sense the first two Lincoln films use the trope of the monomythical hero whose wanderings from the familiar into the unfamiliar, even supernatural, lead to trials and travails which birth new knowledge, including understandings of self, which are returned by the hero to his homeland.[492] *Trooper* used this universal story of the individual

[491] 'Trooper of Troop K,' GPJ Collection, Reel 7 Microfilm, P. 340b
[492] The classic pronouncement of the monomyth was first iterated in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Pantheon, 1949 (3rd Ed. 2008).

becoming to traverse paths that breached and then sought to dissolve the DuBoisian veil. The unknown realms were made up of both the regimentation of the military as extension of white society and the foreign land in which white and black Americans attempted to assert their nation's will.

The craving to be American might even be considered part of an overall desire to blot out or mute the dynamics of being black in America, of having relations of difference controlled by race and color. Participation in the military is an express claim on citizenship, the right of ownership of the nation, and representation by the nation. Standing against a common foe worked toward achievement of those goals as racial differences were back grounded by national similarity. The American belonging of blacks, fighting 'in deadly shamble side by side with the white man,' was portrayed in *Trooper* against the relief of the Mexican and his alien homeland, a field of play where basic human survival required the whites and blacks of Troop K to conduct themselves, if not to see themselves, as a unit with a common underlying standing, that of an American.[493] Where one might have seen a battle precipitated by an American, read white, hubris and lack of respect for the national sovereignty of the Carrancistas, a lack of respect which was in part based on racial prejudices, it is also possible to see where African Americans of the period would have seen an opportunity to show out as American the more pleasing framework for their viewing of the film. A Chicago Defender review of the film began with a poem which celebrated the bravery of black cavalrymen while referring to the Carrancistas as 'Montezuma's murderous sons,' primitivized others whose treachery and assumed

[493] Article on *The Trooper of Troop K*, Microfilm, GPJ Collection

bloodlines blotted out their national standing and aspirations.[494] Shiftless Joe shoots several Mexican skirmishers and is transformed into a hero. The scene was repeatedly described as triggering a celebratory rancor as 'the audience rose and cheered frantically,' which was likely part excitement at seeing such an assertive action perpetrated by an on-screen Negro and part delayed release of frustration and displaced aggression.[495]

Trooper, torn from the headlines and quickly put into production in order to capitalize on the topical heat generated by the story, asked the audience to identify with the manner of looking which produced the most pleasurable viewing experience, which is to say the perspective that brushed over American over-assertion and dismissals of people of color by people of color in favor of privileging a portrayal of wishfully jingoistic color blindness. Blacks were encouraged to bask in the experience of a belonging and recognition that corresponded with desires for such experiences in the 'real' world. This required that the audience's Black Gaze be informed by a White Gaze when taking in the representations of the Mexican, a gaze produced by a camera that thereby did not directly engage in the conundrum of addressing how such imperialistic tendencies belied a racism that blacks themselves suffered under. When the New Orleans area booking manager arranged to have *The Trooper of Troop K* continue from its tour of every "mixed" theater in the Crescent City to a 'theater which plays to "white" people only,' the St. Louis Argus noted that such was 'not in a dream, but in actual reality."[496] The projection of images of patriotic Negro daring to a southern white audience was reported in various spots across

[494] 'The Trooper of Co. K,' Chicago Defender, October 14, 1916, p.4. Trooper of the Tenth – Louis Grice.
[495] 'A Sensation,' Lincoln Motion Picture Company, p. 341a, Reel7, GPJ Collection.
[496] GPJ Collection, Microfilm, Reel 7, p.342. 'Breaks New Ground'

the nation and white recognition in the form of applause was particularly noted as a reified instance of motion pictures bringing to life the fantasies of acceptance and notice.[497] The film's presentation of blood sacrifice and the rescue of the white captain was reported as having produced in 'real life' the kind of being-seen-as-one-wishes-to-be-seen that the rescue in *Realization* had created on only a dramatic level. This was not just imagining a new world, it was a discursive exercise in limited blooms of interaction and activity which rendered new, albeit fleeting, realities that gave hope of a new set of relationships with the broader, white society.

Still, no easy or total identification with the White Gaze or American-ness follows. The fact that the battle was lost is not really attended to, though such was the obvious outcome. Rather, for African Americans it appears that the relevancy of the event, and therefore the source of feelings of triumph, stemmed from the way some of the troopers of Troop K conducted themselves, troopers represented in the character of Shiftless Joe and held forth as an example of the potential of any and all members of the race. This somewhat counterintuitive response was an indication of the ambivalent position blacks held relative to their being American. Where viewing *Trooper* was concerned, the lack of overall success in the nation's foray in the Battle of Carrizal was subordinated to the enjoyment of seeing black mettle reflected back onto the audience in the context of a demonstration of suitability and worthiness for full citizenship and acknowledgment. Where claims on national place and ownership were in part based on sacrifice and in part based on comparisons to non-nationals, the battle and the film about the battle produced a

[497] Ibid. 'The Trooper' an unattributed blurb noted that, when whites and blacks watched the film together in a 'mixed' setting, it was hard to tell who applauded more heartily.

winning grade for blacks. Indeed, defeat, the depiction of black and white soldiers together suffering the dirty trick of an 'ambush' and then being 'mown down' by the machine gun as they charged forward in pursuit of their duty was a necessary in order for the film to present white vulnerability and black strength.[498]

The Law of Nature: Patriarchy over the Urban Moral Abyss

The third Lincoln Film, *The Law of Nature* (1917), the last to star Noble Johnson, who also created the scenario, moved the question of self-mastery much more directly into the parlor of middle class mores and the domestic dynamics between man, wife and child. Dubbed a 'social drama,' the film's three reels continued to present thematic images of mobility, both socio-economic and geographic in nature, but the scenarios of black bravura and direct exchanges with powerful whites was set aside in favor of a world comprised of only Negroes, a world wherein the central tensions revolved around how the characters would handle the obligations of family.

Albertine Pickens played Agnes Vincent, a comely socialite from an unspecified urban center who is just out of school. Agnes has decided to spend the summer months caring for the children of a wealthy cattle baron of the West. Before she departs a party is held in her honor and the audience is introduced to Henry Bronson, a 'Beau Brummel' of the nightlife set. Agnes departs and is enchanted by the travel through the countryside and the newness of the experience. Upon arriving at the ranch she meets Jess Allen, a cowboy foreman played by Johnson, and their mutual interest progresses to a moonlit marriage in spite of the efforts of a Mexican suitor who has tried to win Agnes' affections by showing

[498] Trooper Scores', Microfilm, Reel 7, p342, GPJ Collection.

off with a lariat. As the summer closes Agnes persuades Jess to leave the cowboy west so as to return to the city. Jess is able to find employment in a position that pays well and the pair settle into an apartment. Bronson is shown to have established himself as a man who lives off of the 'weaker sex.' The sheen of marriage begins to wear thin as Jess strikes Agnes as less and less attractive in the light of the big city. The arrival of a child does not bring them closer. When Jess 'humors' Agnes and attends a ball his 'lack of social requirements' mortifies Agnes just as Bronson sweeps into her sights. Though she initially fends off his attempts to insinuate himself into her heart, she has been reintroduced to the socialite scene and eventually gives way to his entreaties. Agnes' secret meetings with Bronson lead her to abandon consistent care of the family. Jess returns to the West with the child when, unable to locate Agnes, he find their child left alone in the home. Agnes falls to dancing in a café in order to support Bronson and, unused to that lifestyle, her health crashes. When she can no longer dance Bronson expels her into homelessness. Agnes repents and returns to the West where the joy of reunion with her family overcomes her. She dies with Jess' forgiveness and the baby in her arms.[499]

The Law of Nature as a domestic melo-drama places the connections between husband, wife, and child at the center of a social and cultural play that flows directly from the rugged individualism of the first two titles. The fervid masculinity of *Realization* and *Trooper* led to closures wherein the attainment of the respective goals of the protagonists in those films, financial independence in the former and development into manhood and citizenship in the latter, was accomplished in no small part as a matter of preparation for

[499] 'Synopsis of *The Law of Nature*,' Box 52, Folder 36, GPJ Collection.

matrimony and the fulfillment of filial obligations. *Law* followed those plot lines with a story that centers on a black woman's choices regarding several offerings of masculinity. Agnes' education is merely a polish put on a future of domesticity. In the course of three reels Agnes is presented with three suitors. The Mexican, so often the Other in the Lincoln film catalogue, set up to make the black characters stand out as belonging and part of a normative scenario, is not a serious option. His ham-fisted demonstration of mastery over his lariat is a clear ploy for attention that lacks the spontaneity, and therefore the power to break down barriers of difference in favor of a human moment, that the heroic rescues from the first two films carry. The choice that Agnes must face is that between the even, controlled Jess Allen and the dissolute, predatory dandy pimp, Henry Bronson.

Allen represents the masculine ideal of independence and, able to transfer his workplace excellence to an urban setting with apparent ease, is a master of his person and his fate. Allen is the beacon that is to be sought after and followed if Agnes is to experience fulfillment, a restful soul, and the preferred position of homemaker. Allen provides a base for building a family and future while his rival, Bronson, does not. Rather, Bronson represents a brand of masculinity that is in many ways feminized. He lives off of women, as does the unworthy rival from *Trooper*, and attends to ephemeral concerns such as fashion and dance. Bronson is a man whose idleness is broken only by unproductive activity. The scenario's reference to Beau Brummel, the 19th century Englishman who was synonymous with men's fashion and the expenditure of inordinate amounts of time and energy on his sartorial presentation, allows the audience to see both a variation on

material accrual in the urban setting and a badly decayed set of values which fly in the face of middle class modesty and steadiness.[500]

It is important to note that Jess Allen's masculine status bore a distinctive aspect of male domesticity. While the first three Lincoln films were rife with the 'Cult of Domesticity' that had for so much of the 19th century defined proper femininity as a place in the home preparing a comfortable spot for the husband and the children, Jess Allen, cowboy and breadwinner that he was, nonetheless reflected a modified version of the masculine that took very seriously its responsibilities in the home and in partnering with the lady of the house.[501] Margaret Marsh described the suburban, middle class rise of masculine domesticity as a shift toward companionship wherein the husband 'would make his wife, rather than his male cronies, his regular companion on evenings out. And while he might not dust the mantel or make the bed except in special circumstances, he would take a significantly greater interest in the details of running the household and caring for the children than his father was expected to do.'[502] The rugged individual lionized during the Gilded and early-Progressive Eras was giving way to a modified version of masculinity whose command over his realm was much more expressly demonstrated in the home.

Allen's attentiveness to the home life comes through when he follows his wife from the country to the city and when he 'humors' her by attending the ball in which he has no real interest or place. Allen proves to be a caring father who takes responsibility for his child

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[500] For more on Beau Brummell see Ian Kelly, *Beau Brummell: The Ultimate Man of Style* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013).
[501] Margaret Marsh, 'Suburban Men and Masculine Domesticity, 1870-1915,' *American Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (June 1988), pp. 165-186.
[502] Ibid.

by removing it from the motherless home created by Agnes' fall into corrupted dalliances. Like Johnson's protagonist from *Realization*, Jess Allen is a character who is able to forgive and look beyond defeats in the social realm so as to build and attend to his family. In this light the military development of *Trooper's* Shiftless Joe into readiness to lead a family can bee understood as having shared roots in his kind heart and giving nature. While the masculine tenor of these films dominate the storylines, and while we cannot take away that the more domestic version of the masculinity abandoned claims on dominance or sought to usher in equality between the genders, we can nonetheless detect in the characters portrayed by Noble Johnson a certain refinement regarding the scope of the role of masculinity.

For the character of the female lead, however, the central issue is the question of whether or not she will make the healthiest decision regarding which version of black masculinity she will allow to sculpt the options in her life. Agnes' descent into the short-term pleasures represented by dancing at cafés and presenting her body for the enjoyment and titillation of male strangers is a cautionary example of how black female sexuality could be compromised and given to actions upon which so many stereotypical views of black women were based. In that sense she lets down the on-screen family and the off-screen race. She has not taken to her maternal position of domesticity and instead finds herself under the control of someone who has not mastered himself. The 'weaker sex,' as women are labeled in the synopsis, is thrown into chaos by straying from the stability of Jess Allen's masterful oversight. Agnes' eventual return to Jess Allen's strong, supporting arms and the role of loving wife and mother, especially in a last gasp moment before death,

is a complete repudiation of both a lifestyle of loose morals and any stereotypes aimed at affixing such habits to black womanhood and their sexuality. It is also a suggestion that womanhood is lost without appropriate male guidance. Agnes realizes too late the 'folly and the inevitable consequence of the violation of NATURE'S LAWS.'[503] The paternal, nuclear family was not just a repository right living, it was a sanctuary against the unforgiving, inviolable edicts found in nature regarding profligacy, promiscuity, and care of self. The pressures placed on blacks to conform or face exile and or annihilation were so immense and persistent that, in expressing the importance of family and the maintenance of a sanitary and devoted femininity, the price of straying was death.

When Agnes falls in with Bronson she loses everything that had been 'seemingly serene and beautiful' and becomes little more than a slave.[504] In so far as self-mastery is, by definition, opposed to any state of slavery, Agnes' loss of path can be seen as indicative of a view of freedom that feminizes enslavement and the loss of control over self that such entails. The early 20th century rehabilitation of the black male as head of household was intimately tied to the establishment of black freedom and the calls for equal treatment in America. The nuclear family headed by a male breadwinner is forwarded as a basic social unit that promotes healthy living and the care of the homestead is a natural bulwark against confusion and the deterioration of the soul. Most reviews laded the films technical achievements relative to other race productions, including the acting, and sprinkled in definite, if generic, note of the 'fine moral the story teaches.'[505]

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[503] 'Synopsis of *The Law of Nature*, Box 52, Folder 36, GPJ Collection.
[504] Ibid.
[505] Collection of reviews for *The Law of Nature*, Box 52, Folder 13, GPJ Collection.

The Lincoln films primarily worked on the level of individuals and the relationships they sought to establish in furtherance of a wellbeing that stemmed from both material advancement and maintenance of the physical and psychological self. The mastery of self leads to an ability to master one's surroundings, including the natural world and business, and readies the characters for success in life, including interactions with powerful whites. This maintenance of self, while using projections of imagined scenarios meant to interface with the audience's association of one black body or life with that of the many, was also deeply intertwined with the family as a unit buttressing individuality. The middle class family, derived of no bloodline of wealth or power, belongs to the male head of household and is an extension of his individual history. Responsibility for that family lies within the home and, while a modicum of freedom results, it is also important to consider that such means that the overarching society is theoretically freed from various obligations to the individuals in the family. Qualifying for American citizenship is therefore tightly interwoven with the project of self-sustaining abilities and practices. The Lincoln films, especially the first three, clearly set out to show blacks demonstrating self mastery as an answer to those questioning the race's ability to meet those qualifications, and those stories can also be thought of as edifying presentations meant to erect traditions and habits seen as important for the preparation of the black community's ascension into a fuller citizenship. This is a position that tries to bend the black populace to the values of the dominant social and cultural norms while making minimal entreaties for changes in that society, entreaties which pinned hopes of blacks adhering to the dominant, preferred

values providing reason for the dominant, white powers in the society to change their views of blacks.

The dichotomy between the urban and the rural west as locales for the creation of stable home lives is notable in *Law*. The urban setting is exciting and clearly affords opportunities for material advancement. However, the worldliness and surfeit of choices found in the city prove a dangerous lure for characters that were less than staunch in their morality. The Lincoln team was clearly influenced by concerns about the squalid morass encountered by blacks immigrating from the South to urban centers in the North and the bundle of notions that fueled fears of Negro declension in those settings. Kevin Gaines has noted in his discussion of W.E.B. Dubois' study on the malaise experienced by Philadelphia Negroes at the turn of the century that the concept of urban pathology was derived from a number of perspectives regarding the lives of American blacks.[506] Specifically, the 'plantation legend,' which asserted that black wellbeing was tied to the southern farmlands, coupled with the idea that patriarchal families were the locus of race progress. That position tended to embrace social science critiques which worried that blacks, especially the lower classes, were prone to social transgressions, disease, and crime. This produced a body of advisory narratives that suggested the city, far from the countryside's hard, morality-installing toil, was likely to undermine efforts at black urban assimilation due that environment's excess of cheap enticements, crude consumption, and sexually promiscuous single black women who attracted exploitative, clownish black males.[507]

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[506] Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p. 158.
[507] Ibid.

The Law of Nature does not wholly follow the script presented by the narratives of black urban decline we have just noted as there is care to avoid presenting well worn stereotyped images of black dysfunction. While the Henry Bronson character is very much drawn in the spirit of a city hustler sexually despoiling the race's feminine element, he is not described as a buffoon or fool. The minstrelsy upon which mocking visions of black male attempts at urban sophistication were based appears to be absent, which helps to make his moral shortfalls more about class than race. In any event, the single woman in this scenario has some schooling and is willing to leave the city in order to take gainful employment. Her inability to fend off the lurid offerings of the city do not stem from being a new immigrant arrival and the suggestions seems to have been that even entrenched black individuals of the settler class could be led astray, though much of that is played as a matter of gender. The elite Negro in *Law* is from a rural area and does represent the hard work, muted desires, and reliability of middle class mores. He is also able to assimilate where employment is concerned, though he does not fit in with the socialite scene. The LMPC as wont to project the experience of the Western Wild as prepatory for life anywhere.

The sequence of Jess Allen's attendance at the ball represents one of three instances in the Lincoln films wherein middle class black social events are a stage for the unfair judgment of a major character, the others occurring in *Realization* and the fourth title, *A Man's Duty*. These scenes present interesting imagery of Negro characters operating in all-black settings while experiencing alienation from a group of which they consider themselves to be a part. One of the promotional stills used for *The Law of Nature* shows

Johnson's Allen standing in the midst of the urban ball's social gathering, a piano player and a dancer in the far background providing entertainment and the room filled with light-skinned revelers enjoying their drinks and conversation. The tables are adorned with flowers, somewhat wilting here and there, and a room is one of tactile abundance represented by fashionable hats, wallpaper, and fine woodwork. The protagonist wears a look upon his face that communicates ostracization as he glowers into off screen spaces, scowling.[508] A similar still from *Realization* depicts the female lead forlornly peering off screen, her eyes slightly downcast in an expression of saddened knowing, her line of sight pointing away from the fashionable garden partiers who are seated or standing behind her, their disapproving stares cutting through and around her and right up off the paper of the photo. Such imagery captures the social tensions, divergences of black experiences during the Progressive Era, and the class-based surveillance that existed in the black middle class.

The treatment these social judgments receive in the Lincoln films seems to carry an ambivalence regarding the dynamics of acceptance and rejection in the black populace. On the one hand the narratives unquestionably represent and echo foundational values associated with middle class mores. Individualism, business-mindedness, abiding by the law, paternalist households, and education are forwarded throughout the company's catalogue. However, on the other hand, the social circles in which the lead characters operate are presented as being notably prone to understandings and the drawing of conclusions based in untrustworthy group-think and profound misunderstandings of

[508] 'The Law of Nature,' *The Chicago Defender*, July 14, 1917.

circumstance and personal nature. While mix-ups and faulty assumptions or routinely used in films, including those presently in question, to create dramatic strain or comedy, these scenes of rejections and expulsion also speak strongly of the overall black experience in America, and likely to some degree came out of the Johnsons' own experiences of seeking out connections and spaces undivided by the veils between blacks or between blacks and whites. These scenes showed how one could have problems being seen as one knows and sees oneself even within the confines of one's own race or social set. This worked to highlight the human aspect of such interpersonal issues and provided some relief from the race question. The propping of middle class mores definitely had roots in attempting to address and live up to mainstream values, the minutiae of social politics was more universal in content.

Aside from these relatively minor amendments to the typologies of the regular city denizens, the most important diversion from typical assessments that the country life was best for most blacks was the removal of the idea of the salutary rural setting from the skullduggery, prejudice, and violence of the South into the uncluttered and therefore seemingly pristine West. In *The Law of Nature* the West was nearly a supporting character, an atmosphere and array of physical wonders that created a setting fully removing Agnes from the urban morass and cleansing her social and domestic palate in preparation for a humble marriage. Throughout the Lincoln films the West was a third option to the usual North-South dichotomy which presented a subtle twist on the Turnerian Frontier Thesis wherein a democracy of egalitarianism built on available land and fairly open relations

amongst pioneer mentalities occurred in an escape from the suffocating rural South and the grind of northern cities rather than from stodgy European remnants.[509]

This idea of the West imbues the constant depiction of restless movement in the Lincoln films with a lust for the potentialities unloosed by borderland dynamics, areas of blending and extensions into new vistas that defied the fixatives of race. Further, by placing black agency on the crests of waves moving out of the South and North, from East to West, from the rural to the urban to the rural, Lincoln films such as *The Law of Nature* portrayed African Americans as partaking of the great American history, as partners in the making of a great nation belonging to both the white and the black race. Though the frontiers that Jackson found so profoundly central to the creation of the American democracy and ethos had closed, the Lincoln films presented the possibility that anchoring in the West might open the entire United States as a proving ground for new frontiers of race and human experiences beyond race. The Lincoln scenarios remade in blackness Jackson's proclamation that 'All peoples show development,' in American movements westward.[510] While the synopsis for *Law* at no time addresses race or race relations, the story of black middle class values battling with black urban degeneracy fits into overall Progressive Era conversations amongst the race's elites which fretted not only how black foibles and failures worked to paint the whole of the race with the unfortunate actions of a few, but how the race was to best achieve an upward trajectory of increasing successes

[509] This take on Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis was based on his writings in 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History,' found in *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' and Other Essays*, Ed. John Mack Faragher (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 31-61.
[510] 'Synopsis for A Man's Full Duty,' Box 52, Folder 37, GPJ Collection.

and opportunity. Uplift was not just about improving the positioning of the race and its economic opportunities, it was most assuredly also about auditioning versions and expressions of blackness which would hopefully lead to new relations with whites, which is to say with power. The West was literally and figuratively a place to start a new America where race relations were involved. In that sense the Lincoln portrayals of uplift via the West intimated that mobility was not just social or geographic, but also political.

A Man's Duty, the Lincoln Company's fourth film, released in the fall of 1919, was written by the company's new star attraction, Clarence Brooks, who took over top billing after Noble's departure from the company. *Duty* told a tale of a male protagonist from a prominent black family who fells a social adversary during a dispute and is forced to flee on a cross-country trek wherein he loses his status completely but comes to know true love with a woman who believes in him in spite of his fugitive status. When it is discovered that his adversary did not actually die, the protagonist is able to return home with his honor restored and his place in society enhanced by marriage and head of household status.[511] Beyond being the company's most purely rendered melo-drama and the film they made which most assiduously envisioned a separate sphere of blackness wherein blacks were wholly analogous to whites, *Duty* presents in a less interesting fashion many of the same dynamics found in the prior titles, especially *The Law of Nature*, and is therefore a film that does not require a close read in the context of this study. For this reason we will next look at the final Lincoln, *By Right of Birth*, the company's most interesting treatment of race and identity.

[511] Microfilm, GPJ Collection.

By Right of Birth and the Crossing of Class and Racial Misidentification

Released in 1921 and comprised of six 1000 foot reels, *By Right of Birth* was written by George Johnson and, as the first three films reflected many aspects of Noble Johnson's personal métiers and experiences, so did *Birth* draw on many of George's touchstones. Anita Thompson played Juanita Cooper, a university woman in California, the adopted daughter of Frank Cooper, a former Oklahoma rancher comfortably retired to the west coast and rumored to be of Native American ancestry. Juanita develops a mutual though clandestine interest in a black law student, the highly intelligent and virile Phillip Jones. The foster mother, Geraldine Cooper, suffering under gambling debts, obtains the assistance of a Mexican-American stockbroker, Romero, in order to return to Oklahoma so as to secure oil leases from Negro Freedmen, including those freed by Native Americans, who may not be aware of the value of their property. Upon arriving in Oklahoma Romero homes in on an allotment he has learned of from an old Native American woman named Minnie. The allotment belongs to Helen Childers, the daughter of Minnie's Nephew, John Childers, also a Native American who is married to a Freedman wife. However, the Childers had years before gone west and had not been heard from since their departure. Romero returns to California and, hatching a plan to take possession of the Childers allotment, he forges Helen's name to the deed. He also uses a 'correspondence school detective' and a chauffer to see if the missing Helen Childers can be found. It is discovered that the Coopers had come upon the wreckage of the Childers' wagon when heading west and rescued, then adopted, the sole survivor, whom they named Juanita. Helen Childers, the missing allottee, thereby turns out to be Juanita Cooper, who in one fell motion goes

from being essentially white to being black. This discovery leads Juanita to be cast out from the Cooper's home and she is subsequently befriended by Mother Agnes, who helps young and needy Negro females. Phillip Jones celebrates the discovery of Juanita's black background as he can now court her openly. This romantic turn of event happens none too soon as Jones is able to use his legal training and acumen to thwart the stockbroker's attempt to defraud Juanita. A fight ensues followed by a car chase culminating in an accident wherein Romero is killed, the autos having replaced the horse as the site of masculine thrills and assertions of power. Minnie comes to California to find her family and, after she retains Jones in a well-paid legal position, it is established that Mother Agnes is Juanita's long lost biological mother and the young woman comes into the allotment and fortune that is her birthright.[512]

The most striking aspect of *By Right of Birth* is the move to directly address racial identity and its connections to partnership and the project of material wellbeing. Before tackling the tangle of cross-breeding and inter-group alliances forged between the various races it must be posited that the synopses that can be found regarding By Right of Birth do not make it clear that the character of Frank Cooper is of any particular race and some assumptions must be made in order to place as a member of one racial community or another. The synopses note that he has an obscured, even furtive or 'rumored,' blood tie to the Native American population of Oklahoma and it seems unlikely that such a set of relations would be seen as something to be hidden or unspoken if Cooper was a non-white. Further, no such mystery is necessary where the coupling of John Childers and his

[512] 'Synopsis of By Right of Birth,' Box 52, Folder 35, GPJ Collection.

Freedman wife. Finally, Juanita's expulsion from the Cooper family could be seen as a move to remove her from the flow of information regarding her potential right to the sought after allotment, but the fact that the discovery of her background leads Jones to suddenly feel that Juanita was available for courtship suggests that a racial change of status accompanied her family disconnect and the logical assumption is that the change involved a move away from whiteness.

Birth presents an array of strategic partnerships between racial or ethnic representatives of whiteness, blackness, Native American enclaves, and Mexican populations. The settings are borderland areas where racial identity is portrayed as often multiple due to the intermingling between the putative races and the uncertainties inherent in the dominant or preferred methods of racial classification. Foregrounding the strategic and circumstantial nature of racial identification creates a rich field of demonstration or inquiry into the ways that race works on efforts of relationship building and the establishment of wellbeing. The relationships range from the professional exchange of value and service between Minnie and Phillip Jones to the manipulations of Geraldine Cooper and Romero, to the inter-marriage between John Childers and Mother Agnes.

The role that race plays in manifesting the interstices of relations between Americans is given attention in the arc of Juanita's Cooper's accidental transformation from a public white to a public, and authenticated, Negro. The cultural nature of race announces itself with fair directness as Juanita's history of multiple racial identifications represented the ways that individuals are constructed as being members of this or that race as opposed to

being fixed in the womb by a murky biological tie. Indeed, not only are the bloodlines 'mixed' but changes overwhelm circumstances with immediacies that lead Juanita to be adopted into a white household, rejected, and then adopted again into a black home for young women of the race. Whether or not Juanita saw herself as a Negro in the manner of kinship and blood relations or in the sense of affiliation marked by her new experiences with ostracization is not clear in the synopsis and was perhaps not clear to audiences watching the film. It must be noted that the transition occurred so abruptly and her adjustment, including a near immediate migration into the black community and support system, occurs so quickly that it is hard to find decisive evidence regarding the nature of the character's reaction to having her identity so violently changed from without. Even the growth of her relationship with Jones is not much of a guide as she had an interest in him before the 'switch.' The overall effect of this narrative arc is one which suggests both that Juanita was at all times a person operating along the lines of a personal identity that did not see a chasm between her own humanity and that of Jones. She also seems to have been aware of the plight of blacks and therefore quickly understood the most efficacious response to her altered societal position, a processing of change which allowed her to quickly affiliate with blackness while also transferring a complex range of filial associations. The undeniable narrative hastiness of this switch hints at an assumption that hidden racial roots were not uncommon, or at least an understood possibility always in play, a reality that lent ideas of racial separatism and biological difference the flavor of a lie.

This overall presentation of the contingency of race acknowledges the cultural ties and social dynamics that constituted black culture while also suggesting that individuals could not be essentialized along racial lines. The racial ambiguity of Juanita's stepfather and Juanita herself mark the inherent instability of race as a totalizing influence and speaks to the Johnsons' experiences which clearly suggested to them that, in many ways, race was a system of belief and perception that could be worked around or over via several strategies aimed at putting relations with others on a different basis. We are constantly reminded of the Johnsons desire to see circumstance and humanity turn away from a color line which they projected as blurred by physical traits and miscegenated backgrounds, behavioral tracks that confounded stereotypes, and demonstrations of shared humanity.

Interestingly, the scenario does not for a moment suggest that Juanita might continue with her white life after being put out by her white family. As has been noted above, once the truth of her background is made known, she is automatically pulled into the black community. The plot device of a reversal of race was not uncommon in film at the time *By Right of Birth* was made. Jane Gaines noted in *Fire and Desire* that Oscar Micheaux, among others, had an abiding interest in dealing with race reversals and that it seemed that, while inadvertent passing caused no particular ire, passing in order to forward a deception undertaken by the one who is passing was considered unacceptable. For instance, the act of passing is not presented as a negative reflection on the character of a light-skinned young female who is passed as white without her knowledge in his pair of adaptations of Charles Chestnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars*, the first filmed in 1924/25 and the latter

in 1932.[513] This is, it would seem, presumably because she is not demonstrating an inner failure to embrace her authentic self and no renunciation of blackness or connection to the black corporate body is entailed. Gaines contrasts that form of passing with the passing that is undertaken by the character of Jefferson Driscoll in Micheaux' *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) who presents himself as white as part of a repudiation of blackness overall.[514] The need to avoid such a denial of blackness does not obviate the embrace of the permeability of race as represented by passing. Juanita Cooper does not pass on purpose and the surprise of her actual background exposes the inconsistencies of race as a practice attempting to establish rigid lines of difference where none exist, a matter of bad faith on the part of white power and a source of absurdity that allows the audience to see the unjust machinations of the DuBoisian veil as it rises and then falls on either side of the same person. The lack of integrity of the color line would not have been surprising to the black audiences watching *By Right of Birth* and the sensationalist energies released by the revelation of Juanita's blackness would have been in part made of up the pleasures of verification, of seeing another play out and acknowledge what was already known about the nonsensical actuation of racial difference in America.

The presentation of borderland environments wherein race is unsettled and inter-personal relations occurring within those environments which are thereby left to be played out according to entreaties to other sources of authority such as money, technical or scientific expertise, and the law rounds out the world created by *By Right of Birth*. As a result we get the fullest of the Lincoln depictions of how race relations interact with the

[513] Gaines, *Fire and Desire*, 156
[514] Ibid.

quest for wellbeing in America, the hunger to move upward through and across racial boundaries. The now familiar themes of mastery over the earth's riches and knowledge, such as one's legal rights, dovetail with shifting alliances and opportunities which all have ties to the perceived racial status of the characters. Middle Class, educated blackness operates in a world that flows between the white and black worlds via racial ambiguity and economic mobility flows therefrom. Even as the film tries to present the audience with the enjoyable sight of a world wherein blacks outduel foreign others while pursuing a just and rightful claim of fortune in direct defiance of white chicanery, the audience was also allowed the comfort of seeing those events come to pass within a story about race in America that brooked no denial of blackness or the basic essentialist idea that Juanita was returned to being what she *really was*, that she had a basic state of being connected with a blackness that was not quite so unfixed. As a result, the film presented the viewing pleasure of sameness and difference. Blackness is shown as functional in the white world, and deserving of equal consideration under the law, and then returns to its own realm materially enriched by successful operations within the white world.

Narrative Imagery in the LMPC Films

Based on the still photography and the tiny helping of remnant moving images from the Lincoln catalogue we can make several useful comments about the production values and art direction which add to our overall understanding of the was the narrative content was put forth. The interiors, whether in domestic parlor settings or professional offices, were obligingly decked out in the surplus of middle class comfort. While there are no remaining photos indicating that the settings involved true grandeur, there were always

nice lamps, furniture, and well-utilized bookshelves in the backdrop, details depicting lives of ongoing material stability and educated involvement.[515] The more formal events captured for the films could, as in the case of *By Right of Birth*, involve large rooms with towering feathery plants, wall-sized paintings, cut-glass double doors, draperies, and shiny hard-wood flooring that approached opulence. Material want was not something the LMPC was interested in showing its audiences. The exteriors were generally less arresting, though it appears the locations utilized for *The Trooper of Troop K* were quite authentic approximations of the Mexican countryside. The presence of horses in these outside shots was near constant, including yet another scene from *Birth* wherein Clarence Brooks' protagonist commandeers a runaway steed.[516] The theme of mastery over the earth is maintained in various shots of men dominating domestic animals such as horses and cattle, in the case of *The Law of Nature*, and in all instances the men are dressed for action, whether in army gear, cowboy togs, or sporting sweaters and flat-top boater hats of straw.[517]

Stella Bruzzi has noted in her *Undressing Cinema*, a study of the way the costumes of film project identity, that the dress of the characters on screen projects significance and content not necessarily beholden to the character's nature or the narrative thrust of the

[515] 'Mark the Date,' Advertisement, with stills from the various LMPC films, Box 52, Folder 13, GPJ Collection.
[516] Much of this scene can be viewed on the single reel with scenes from *By Right of Birth* available in the GPJ Collection.
[517] 'Mark the Date,' Advertisement, Box 52, Folder 13, GPJ Collection.; Single reel of film from *By Right of Birth*, GPJ Collection.

film.[518] The LMPC stills provide us with information about the dress of the characters and their clothing communicates a few things that enhance the story but are not directly derived from the plot. The clothing in these films, as well as many of the interior set pieces, are declarative props meant to broadcast characters that have a history of accomplishment and the accumulated material rewards that the popular understanding of the nation's economic system would expect: three-piece suits, nice hats, 'decorative woman' in flowing, filigreed dresses with highly visible jewelry and watch chains, all moving and carrying on in spaces adorned with the aforementioned trappings of middle class comfort.[519] When projected for members of the audience that may have been from the lower economic rungs such representations of the race's elites took on the uplift message of striving for material advancement by way of participating in bourgeois lifestyles. However, there was also the message of maintaining the middle class connections that some black Americans already enjoyed and in that way the Lincoln films and their characters all dressed in the latest fineries, driving about in automobiles and demonstrating their mastery over the law and the sciences were examples of a tradition of attainment within the race. For the elites of the race, such as Booker T. Washington, Jr., who was given some cameo screen time for a high society scene in *Birth*, the films could be celebrations confirming progress already had.[520]

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[518] Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1997), see her first two chapters on costume affairs in film.
[519] Ibid., xvii.
[520] George mentions the participation of Booker T. Washington Jr.in George P. Johnson, *Collector of Negro Film History*.

The Lincoln films present a particularized range of uplift expressions emanating from the perspective of the race's 'talented tenth' and holding out American middle class values and lifeways as belonging to Negroes, as well. The narrative content of these stories of blackness both reimagined and correctively verified black mastery and the rightful claims on full citizenship being made by the African American populace. When we consider the difficulty that George Johnson had in cleanly separating the presentation of blacks living materially comfortable, morally-driven lives from the race's frustrations with the public image of blackness so often coddle by white society, it can be seen that the films were also about dialoguing with white society, or at least the black population's life under the White Gaze, in order to proffer a search for alternate sources of authority which might move race aside. Over the course of the five narrative titles released by the LMPC, especially the first two films, the scenarios and synopses set out the law, patriotism, commercial dealings, and overtures to shared human values as sources of knowledge and decision-making which moved race to the side and thereby created spaces for material and social improvement, advances which demonstrated that blacks shared points of view and value with whites even as there was no attempt at true integration.

Building Awareness of the Black Nation from the West: George Johnson and the Pacific Coast News Bureau

George Johnson's predilection for gathering and disseminating information led him to begin a news service, the Pacific Coast News Bureau, which he undertook while

simultaneously maintaining his clerking position with the Los Angeles Post Office where he worked the evening shift through midnight. Johnson began the service in earnest just after the film company had shuttered its affairs and, in seeking to provide stories that he thought African Americans in general would be interested to learn of, he worked to provide for the nation's African Americans a sense of their breadth of their experiences as a corporate body living a variety of far-flung lives in America. George joined in this endeavor other Negro newsmen of the 1920s such as Chicago's Claude Barnett, who started his new services, the Associated Negro Press, in 1919.[521] As the above discussion of the Lincoln films has demonstrated, film, even in the context of historical inquiry, is often treated as text. In that vein it is appropriate to investigate the sources of news stories such as the PCNB as another loci of the Johnson business tree aimed at telling the black nation stories about blackness for a profit, a business that presented words, edited and carefully manicured for impact and relevance, which triggered images and memories in ways not altogether different from the dynamics that created visual connects, anticipations, recollections, pleasures and discomforts out of moving pictures. Indeed, the importance of the visual for the imparting of news can be gleaned from the aforementioned Barnett's early years, wherein had entered into the news service industry by distributing images of leading Negroes, and in his later years, where, not unlike the Lincoln efforts to use film as both propaganda for the war effort and as an in for government patronage, he embarked on an attempt in the early-1950s to address a lack of positive black imagery in news reels by helping to put together the *Negro America* news

[521] Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 94-127.

reel project which, in spite of minimal federal support, was able to produce filmic shorts under that title from 1951 to 1955.[522]

The PCNB was begun at a modest and self-financed cost in 1923. George obtained a mimeograph machine and other basics such as paper and stencils and was underway, working on the news service from 7 a.m. until his 2:30 p.m. departure for the post office. Johnson's experiences as a national booking manager had allowed him to enjoy contacts with most of the nation's ongoing African-American weekly publications and those concerns had generally reacted favorably to the news he had sprinkled in with the updates of the LMPC's progress. Coinciding with Noble's entrenchment in the film industry, George had begun in 1915 a collection of clippings, articles, and other ephemera addressing the black experience in film which grew to include a great many entries regarding black experiences in the West, especially those regarding black business.[523] At the time he began the News Bureau he had amassed a considerable store of information on those subjects and was in a unique position to report on recent happenings while filling out their import and meaning with backstories from his cache. George subscribed to a white-owned service that provided clippings from throughout the West and he had them send him all topics mentioning African Americans. He would then workup a dispatch for his subscribers that were augmented by his personal files. George also cultivated scoops through a sort of partnership he held with Jimmy Smith, a black man who owned a casting company which

[522] Ibid., pp. 118-127.
[523] George P. Johnson, *Collector of Negro Film History*, p. 215

provided black actors for the movie industry and was therefore a rich source of inside information regarding blacks in Hollywood.[524]

George's turn as a scenarist putting together drama, comedy, social commentary, and uplift into five or six reels of on-screen story provided excellent preparation for the news service's multi-thematic dispatches. The PCNB would do business with highly visible African-American journals and weeklies such as *The Chicago Defender* and *The Pittsburgh Courier*, charging five dollars a month for exclusive usage rights. However, Johnson targeted as his core the smaller papers that were often confined to reporting primarily on local events as they could not afford the more prominent services, such as the National Negro Press Association, based out of Louisville, Kentucky and affiliated with the National Negro Business League. [525] The Pacific Coast News Bureau therefore aimed to broaden the meaning and scope of what constituted national news for African Americans by reporting from the black West Coast on regional events that reflected dynamics and narratives that spoke to the overall black demographic and the ongoing development of a black sense of nation.

The news service was initially free or bartered for ad space for the film company with the idea being to build a reputation that would draw subscriptions sufficient to support the Bureau as a profitable venture. It was therefore of paramount importance that credit be given by the journals that used the PCNB's dispatches free of charge, and, when some of the better known race journals did not give that acknowledgement, Johnson attempted to

[524] Ibid.
[525] For information on the National Negro Press Association see Frederick German Detweiler, *The Negro Press in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922).

protect his position by gently chiding those freeloaders with calls for 'professional courtesy,' though he was careful to avoid naming any publication in particular so as avoid poisoning potential customers.[526] Johnson's reliance on broadly understood standards of professionalism and ethical behavior was buttressed by the wariness of substandard conduct that he evinced while with the LMPC. Johnson was also forced to take into consideration the financial limitations of some of the smaller journals, so he had no choice but to make every effort to see that the more established publications paid full freight. George supplemented his subscription receipts by purchasing a set amount of space in a given publication and then selling all or a portion of it to firms who wanted to advertise therein.

The news stories disseminated by the Pacific Coast News Bureau were chosen or written by George Johnson and his values and perspectives can be seen in the types of stories that he thought would be of import or interest to the nation's black populace. As with the films produced by the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, the news bits that came from the PCNB both sought to meet needs and desires while also shaping the audience that was being serviced. The stories often dealt with the ways being black effected movement and access to spaces of private and public leisure, labor, and business options. Johnson sought to follow black entry into pathways and relationships of power, especially when the event involved a projection of power across the expanse of the nation and the fortified boundaries of race. The growing economic might of the black population and the various obstacles that were raised also found prominence in his stories. Most of the stories he

[526] George Johnson's notes on the Pacific Coast News Bureau, Microfilm, Reel 10, GPJ Collection.

released seemed to have a noticeable, if sometimes minor, aspect which addressed inter-racial relations and how those relations affected the ways blacks were perceived by the mainstream in the west and over the country. Uplift, the hope and plan for black improvement and inclusion in the American mix was at all times a guiding presence, as was the desire to show the humanity of blackness.

Johnson tended to make sure that, where it was at all relevant, money was spoken of front and center with exact amount provided as possible. Dollar amounts were used as a shorthand notation, as a convenient, familiar method of measuring the race's relative placement and success within the American landscape. In a 1927 release it was noted that, of more than $3 million allocated for the annual appeal to the Los Angeles County's Community Chest, only $21,290.44 was specifically earmarked for race charity organizations. Johnson was thereby able to communicate in limited print space objective numbers which provided a shorthand for unequal treatment and the race's relative position of considered importance or merit where charity contributions were concerned.[527] Money counts also helped to tie the race's upward mobility to concrete economic markers. The PCNB forwarded a Seattle Business Chronicle article entitled 'Negro Banks Show Progress of Race' wherein it was noted that 80 race banks, 'wholly owned and operated by Negroes,' had banded together in an association with national reach. Those banks were reported as having on deposit $22,000,000 representing the holding of 320,000 clients whose average balance stood at $69. That average was considered 'comparatively low' relative to white holdings, but the article noted that,

[527] '$21, 290.44 Appropriated for Los Angeles Colored Charities,' Microfilm, Reel 10, GPJ Collection.

within the context of what was likely as much as $66,000,000 in non-negro banks, it had to be considered that 'the colored citizen is progressing.' An example of a successful negro bank was given, the St. Luke Bank & Trust Co., of Richmond, Virginia, the first owned by a woman of any race in the United States and controlling $500,000 in resources, $30,000 of which were undivided profit.[528] The piece took the opportunity to include numbers for other important bell-weathers of the race's financial state, such as the $100 million in church property, $500 million held by the Negro insurance industry, and the $3 billion in overall property possessed by members of the race.[529] The importance of business leadership was also placed front and center as the piece noted that 'the colored banker is solving the greatest problem he has to face – that of winning the confidence of the people he is seeking to serve, proving to them the he can stand financial responsibility.'[530] Blackness as a marker of financial weakness singled out black banking as suspect, as practically oxymoronic, and vigilance on the part of black patrons was a given even as the need for leadership from such elites was assumed.

African American real property acquisition and migrations into new residential areas was a topic of particular interest to Johnson. He was especially keen to uncover the machinations by which the building of wealth was pursued by blacks and, in some of those instances, assisted or obstructed by whites. For example, the Bureau sent out multiple stories in 1925-26 covering the fate of Gordon Manor, a planned community that was to

[528] 'Negro Banks Show Progress of Race,' Microfilm, Reel 10, GPJ Collection. The piece does not identify the banker, but the St. Luke Bank & Trust was the project of Maggie Walker, Madam C.J. Walker's daughter.
[529] Ibid.
[530] Ibid.

have set aside for black residences prime real estate in Torrance, California, an area five miles north of the wealthy white Los Angeles enclave of Palos Verdes. The venture was to be named after a well-to-do African-American physician and investor, Dr. Wilbur C. Gordon, who bought the 213 acres of property after extensive negotiations in early 1926.[531] Johnson was careful to highlight not only the purchase price of $575,046, but also the details of how the deal was financed, including mention of $191,000 fronted in cash and securities and the implementation of a trust naming Gordon as the beneficiary and a deed in trust representing the position held by the Commercial National Bank. The mere existence of the plans to create such an area for black real estate consumption was likely important enough for some minor inclusion in one of the PCNB's dispatches. However, the PCNB's coverage centered around a dispute that arose between the Gordon group and a collection of powerful whites who wished to keep blacks out of the areas adjacent to their wealthy neighborhoods. The addition of white investors which ballooned the Gordon project into a $7 million 'syndicate,' as Johnson dubbed the venture, fit comfortably into the assimilationist perspective that undergirded so much of his output. The combination of the black ambitions for material improvement, on both the individual and group level, partnering with some whites and opposed by another group of whites, highly visible and powerful, made the story one that required repeated inclusion in the Bureau's releases.

The opposition was composed of heavy hitters such as Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., the noted landscape architect, and H.W. O'Melveny, the named progenitor of one of Los Angeles' oldest and largest law firms. The PCNB reported that this 'combination of

[531] 'New York Banking Interests Involved in Pacific Coast Race Restriction Litigation,' Microfilm, Reel 10, GPJ Collection.

interests' owned or controlled tens of millions of dollars in property bordering the proposed black sub-division and their various attempts to undermine Gordon Manor had culminated in a move to have the municipality condemn the land in order to keep it out of the hands of blacks. The rationality of the Gordon group's undertaking was juxtaposed to the shameful, grasping obstructionism of the opposition who sought to claim the subdivision for a 320-acre public park far from Los Angeles and in an area that already boasted five others. Johnson excoriated this ruse as an orchestration meant only to preclude blacks from acquiring property in an exclusive district.[532] Such a ceiling on black progress and participation in the American flow was highly threatening to any uplift narrative. Investments in cash and faith in the promise of fair opportunities were on the line.

More than $500,000 had been earmarked for street improvements and a dedicated water supply, expenditures that demonstrated the seriousness and capability of the Gordon group and the commonalities they shared with what might be considered proper, or white, investment protocols. Plans had been drawn for homes that ranged in cost from $3500 to a select few planned for wealthy blacks which were priced at as much as $36,000.[533] Landed property as a sign of investment and participation in the overall economy, of roots in a lasting source of value within that system, and the purchases marked over the range of home values the movement of black aspiration and achievement. Gordon sought to 'move a whole community' so as to expand black holdings by breaking them out of the prior confines of residential patterns that had cemented them to the East

[532] Ibid.
[533] Ibid.

of L.A. Gordon Manor was touted as 'our Wilshire or Hollywood,' which is to say the black equivalent of achievement and propertied growth vested in the land. [534] The condemnation won out and the Gordon effort died. This obstruction of commerce required the municipality to issue bonds to cover the cost of buying the Gordon syndicate out at a reported price of $700,000, which represented an amount equivalent to the group's expenditures.

The import of Johnson's meticulous attention to the amounts of money marshaled by Gordon and his investment team is made clear when considering that the for-profit gambit had netted no surplus of revenue and was quashed at a cost of about one-tenth the resources gathered in order to make Gordon Manor a successful black business venture. The message was plain: well-placed blacks heavily invested in a respectable venture and backed in part by money from white investors could be derailed from the project of improving black material well-being and social status by bald chicanery in the guise of the public interest. This could not have been surprising to Johnson, but it was a story that brought together a number of the themes to which he repeatedly returned. Sharing this on a national level, Johnson added this release to a history of similar stories tracking the race's progress and the instances wherein readiness for participation and growth met unjust resistance. Though Johnson seldom editorialized in an overt fashion when presenting the news, he sculpted the information that he put out so that there were enough facts, or plot points, if you will, to make moral conclusions, especially if one were reading the stories from the standpoint of finding and assigning value to protagonists and

[534] Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2006) 239-242.

antagonists operating in a world of inter-racial conflict and cooperation. Black experiences with entrepreneurship, finance, public access, technological proficiency, and the overall effort to partner, participate, and prosper in America was repeatedly followed as it crossed the path of white opposition and alliance.

Johnson's coverage of black striving and material accumulation evinced subtle and insightful observations about the process of black improvement in California. For instance, the PCNB sent its patrons a story noting that the white owned West Coast Theatre Company, which ran theaters that aimed to separately cater to whites and blacks, had planned to utilize the Rosebud theatre located at 19th and Central as a negro house and the Tivoli, located at 42nd and Central, as a white house. This plan was put into motion at a time when, because there were almost no blacks living beyond 34th street, the claims black Angelinos had on the Tivoli were functionally non-existent. However, as the Bureau's piece fairly crowed, the 'rapid acquisition of hundreds of beautiful homes, formerly owned by whites' up and down Central between 12th and 55th, created an increase in the black presence that, along with legal action, forced the planned discrimination at the Tivoli to be scrapped in favor of mixed patronage.[535] The discriminatory intent of the theater owners was thwarted by a bloom of black property ownership into areas that whites had invested in and valued, and black economic power, working in conjunction with the California law, brought an instance of social justice along in its wake. This was a story of black Americans, thrifty and adequately moneyed, forwarding a narrative of the race progress, literally

[535] 'White Capital to Build Another Theatre for Colored Patronage,' Microfilm, Reel 10, GPJ Collection.

grabbing hold of the spaces between black and white and converting them in the name of a society more equal and accessible.

Johnson sometimes wrote as George Perry, an alias he began using to provide a buffer between the LMPC's business and his editorial writing for *The Western Dispatch*, a Los Angeles Negro weekly, and, under that name, he reported that, despite organized efforts by some whites aimed at halting black real estate purchases in certain locales that were to be kept free of color, and despite being forced to pay 'a premium in cold cash of $500 to $1000 per sale,' purchases whites would be able to make at 25% less, blacks were still finding ways to acquire real property in those desired areas.[536] In fact, the busiest realm of black real estate purchasing activity took place in the very areas the development associations sought to keep white. Johnson's typical attention to detail and the mechanics of the financial dynamics involved is on display in this release. The piece lays into the numbers for the area in question, '69 mortgages representing $157,270 and 124 trust deeds for $317,926,' and then, noting that mortgages and trust deeds generally did not list more than half of the involved properties' value, Johnson provided a ready gloss on the hidden values represented by those amounts. The power and persistence of black efforts to exercise their buying clout in pursuit of material improvement had meant almost $1 million dollars worth of property had 'changed hands' during a single week even as the national pull toward state sanctioned segregation and the marginalization of black

[536] Regarding his time with The Western Dispatch, see George P. Johnson, *Collector of Negro Film History*, p. 214.; In re the real estate story see 'White Improvement Organization Alarmed at Negroes Rapid Realty Expansion,' Microfilm, Reel 10, GPJ Collection.

material and participatory advancement proceeded apace.[537] Johnson ties black expansion to the overall history of westward movement so common as an ideal in the narrative of American Manifest Destiny when referring to the spread of black home ownership into these contested areas as the 'Black Americans onward march to the sea.'[538] While the piece specifically editorialized that the many machinations of those individuals and groups running with the Supreme Court's sidestep of any interference with restrictive covenants fell short of bald and direct violence, his inclusion of violence as the only tact not yet openly promoted and followed by the opposition, along with the bench's propensity to decide upon inaction rather than remediation, makes it clear that he considered such obstructions to free black real estate transactions to be part of a progression of logics and practices that maintained connections with the underlying motives and histories of violence and intimidation aimed at black progress.

George was wary distributing news items that centered around black crime so, even when the PCNB sent out lurid stories of black murder or illicit love, there were subtle assimilationist bents to be absorbed at the intersection of black and white conflict and the arc of race advancement.[539] In one dispatch Johnson wrote of a young black porter and janitor who moonlighted as a law student and, when sentenced to life in prison for felling a white man whom he suspected of leading his wife astray, stood before the judge and, 'in precise English and without a trace of emotion,' thanked the bench for 'the consideration

[537] Ibid.
[538] Ibid.
[539] George stated he had ordered clippings of 'everything about Negroes except crime,' though he would not stick strictly to that limitation, George P. Johnson, *Collector of Negro Film History*, 215.

and courtesy shown him by the court.'[540] There is perhaps a too great sense of faith in the possibility of American fair dealing in this picture of a black man being punished for taking the life of a man who putatively attempted to ply the prerogatives of his whiteness with his spouse. Johnson went so far as to note in an aside regarding the jury selection that an admitted member of the Ku Klux Klan had been dismissed from consideration because of that odious affiliation. Johnson recognized and no doubt shared the race's need to map out spaces wherein blackness was not an automatic disqualifier, wherein the machinations of the law could be trusted to grind with a balanced hand even where the issue was as fraught with incendiary historical atrocity as the confluence of violence and interracial sex. The irony of the young, upwardly mobile would-be lawyer finding himself as an object of the court is *almost* secondary to a nuanced presentation of a strangely, even chillingly just proceeding wherein the black perpetrator's striving bona fides make his highly disciplined respect for and deference to the court stand as proof of the possibility of something like a color-blind society.

Johnson held an active interest in stories of technological engagement and mastery as a beacon of modernity, business, and the progress being sought and achieved by 20th Century African Americans. Technology not only offered business the means to achieve new levels of efficiency and productive possibilities, but Johnson also presented the mastery of technological processes as a reflection of black capability and participation in the broader national push for modern triumph. In one story wherein Johnson looked beyond the United States, the PCNB heralded the coming of a national commercial airline,

[540] Pacific Coast New Bureau 2/21/27, Microfilm, Reel 10, GPJ Collection.

the West Indies Aerial Express, which was to carry passengers and mail between Caribbean islands. The use of ever-improving air travel for the transport of bodies and communications between locations such as Santo Domingo, Port au Prince, and Havana meant that trips that used to take two weeks by steamship were to be managed in the course of mere days. Further, stops at Jacksonville and Key West, Florida were going to more efficiently connect the isles with their important and powerful American neighbor.[541] This is a picture of Negro business using technology to truncate physical spaces between varying pockets of diasporic blackness in the Americas and the story effectively illustrates the race's ambitions for black economic and cultural expansions covering an international scope.

In this same vein a story about a black Los Angeles police officer hauled before a police board for charges of conduct unbecoming contained references to black technological mastery. Johnson prefaced his report on the officer physically accosting a white deliveryman who had bragged of Klan membership by pointing out that the policeman had just the week before, under quite different circumstances, earned a moment of public notice by maneuvering his airplane over a considerable gathering of onlookers and through a battery of 'amazing stunts' in support of the dedication of a new factory. [542] The inclusion of the policeman's aerial expertise in service of the creation of a new locus of modern manufacturing, along with the notation that the man who testified against the officer in the professed Klansman's complaint was fined $25 for interfering with a peace

[541] 'Black Republics to Get Air Plane Line,' Microfilm, Reel 10, GPJ Collection.
[542] 'Officer Sheffield of Los Angeles Very Much in the Limelight,' Microfilm, Reel 10, GPJ Collection.

officer, framed the police proceedings against the officer, and the implicit question of their justness, in the context of a broader fracas between black excellence striving to participate in modernity and primitive forces of bigotry and anti-black harassment seeking to fend off the advancement of the race. There is a stark moral judgment being forwarded in the setting of these two poles before the reader and the strong intimation is that the public interest, represented by the police department and its effort to properly control the violence allotted to its mission, had to render justice in part by choosing between the modern and the retrograde.

The stakes connected to the mastery of technology and demonstrations that the race included those who were deserving of participation in modernity were high and encouraged notice of instances wherein a representative of the group, perceived or actual, was entangled in scientific misapprehensions and fecklessness which might be negatively associated with blacks as a whole. The Bureau sent out an 'exclusive' release regarding the conclusion of a rift between the 'progressive' members of a California corporation, the Liberian Transportation Steamship & Excelsior Mining Co., and the founder, Reverend J.E. Lewis, which was precipitated by a cloud of legal problems that flowed from Lewis' history of numerous unincorporated attempts in the steamship business.[543] These companies, likely abandoned or neglected in succession as each became untenable, had made it impossible for the LTS&EM Co. to attract the investment monies necessary for a wholly commercial steamship venture. Johnson noted that the 'progressive' element in the company had suggested that this difficulty in finding cash was also the result of Lewis'

[543] 'New Commercial Steamship Line to Liberia,' Microfilm, Reel 10, GPJ Collection.

very public failures with the craft and business of shipbuilding. The rift is portrayed as one taking place between 'progressive' members of the race, men whose respect and, at the very least, desire to build their commercial intentions on a sound base of proven business practices removed them from the company of those in the race who were ignorant and perhaps less careful about their financial dealings.

Lewis, as the progenitor of the Church of the Living God at Los Angeles Harbor, had set out to create a floating place of worship 'built out of cement and second-hand material' so as to transport his followers to Liberia. In spite of the reverend's attempts to ply white reporters with assurances that his travels would net an 18 karat diamond that he would produce upon his return to America, the white press made the project the butt of 'many a burlesque joke.' [544] *Popular Science* published an article on Lewis' ship which dismissively listed the found materials being used for Lewis' 'Ark' and intoned with mock seriousness that, of the 125 tons of cement necessary for the construction of the boat's 13-inch concrete walls, only five bags had been collected. The piece closed by clucking that the stern was to be a chicken coop packed with fowl. [545] This picture of a black man being hopelessly unable to muster the material and technological wherewithal needed for the realization of his dreams of building a ship capable of taking on nature's mightiest forces fit nicely into common stereotypes of black incompetence and absurdity in the face of modern civilization. The contrast of the technical challenges of building a sound, seafaring ship and the plans for the inclusion of a pen for chickens suggested that the assumed inability of blacks to maintain law and order in the face of choosing between theft and a

[544] Ibid.
[545] 'This Noah is Building His Ark,' *Popular Science*, Vol. 95, August 1919, p.49.

pot with a chicken in it had a transitive property that applied equally to the mastery of the skills and knowledge needed to create a ship that would succeed upon oceans already well-travelled and mapped by whites. This vision of quaint black bumbling was apparently so amusing to the readers of *Popular Science* that a year after the original article ran they returned to the subject with a shorter, but no less demeaning, blurb worrying the boat's ability to weather eviction proceedings that had been brought against Lewis. [546]

It should be pointed out that Johnson wrote of Lewis' plans as including 'African trade route projects,' a commercial aspect to the reverend's plans that was not at all included in the *Popular Science* pieces which were laid out along side multiple tales of science and business vibrantly working in tandem. Beyond comic relief, the tale of a black man floundering on the shoals of the scientific method was part of the presentation of science itself, a proof of sorts that came with a chuckle and a nod. The PCNB's coverage, on the other hand, was meant to highlight the intersection of black business and technical savvy while also separating the race's 'progressive' elites, ready and eager to partner with social and economic power wielded by well-placed whites, from the false prophets who commanded no control over nature nor the respect of the mainstream establishment. The position of the 'progressive' group was voiced by Charles Rotero, who, described as being a native of the Oklahoma Cherokee Nation and a mining engineer formally connected with a Mexican exploratory venture, Los Dos Amigos, Co., was presented like a character out of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company's stable of racially ambiguous uplift characters and

546 'Dispossessing an Ark,' *Popular Science*, Vol. 97,October 1920, p. 36. This piece was placed next to an article about Masai culture which noted that most of the tribe's women were sold for 'a few cows or spearheads' and notes on marvels like bullet proof glass and a hospital on wheels.

should be processed as further reason to think of the Lincoln films as more than mere fantasies.

Rotero was quoted as wanting to not only dissociate the progressive contingent from Lewis' unskilled handling of the business and shipbuilding, but to also distance the group from suggestions that they were attempting to remove blacks to Africa. Their aims were wholly given to import-export efforts and there was 'no intention whatsoever to foster a "back to Africa" colonization movement.'[547] The 'progressive' position was one allied with the business atmosphere and goals of mainstream America and wished to lay claim to a participatory foothold based on the kinds of sensible, measured evaluations that would project sobriety and attract investment. The first step toward earning that foothold was making it clear that they were not connected with huckster designs on ventures leading back to the shores of the Dark Continent. The progressive set was not giving up on their claims on the American dream and they were not suggesting that the nation needed to be fled. Lewis' ineptitude was contrasted to the progressive group's pinpoint attention to profit margins as the PCNB article included the Rotero contingent's opposition to continuing with a deal set up by Lewis which would have involved the $125,000 purchase of the *Chiapas*, a 900 ton, 300 ft. steamer the group assessed as comparable to other ships available for 40% less.[548] The legitimacy of Lewis' opponents could be counted upon to maintain the buoyancy of stockholder positions by the placement of their investments into escrow accounts legally protected from graft. The chaos and instability engendered by Lewis' hopeless ignorance, an expected denominator according to dominant stereotypes of

[547] 'New Commercial Steamship Line to Liberia,' Microfilm, Reel 10, GPJ Collection.
[548] Ibid.

the race, contrasted against the readiness of the elites to conduct business in manners tried and true. Lewis' lack of technical prowess was linked almost preternaturally by mainstream accounts to the idea that he was morally untrustworthy and, when his Ark, scheduled to have made its way southward along the Pacific Coast, eastward through the Panama Canal, and across the Atlantic toward a future in West Africa instead sank into the Los Angeles Harbor on its maiden voyage, the glaring implication was that a race led by men unprepared to utilize science and the best methods of a studied business class were doomed to be submerged from sight. Johnson's handling of the piece instead made it clear that the race's best hopes resided with those men of color most ready and placed to masterfully meld business and science, technology and commerce.

The PCNBs coverage of the Lewis affair clearly both responds to and anticipates the type of perspective exampled by the *Popular Science* pieces, dismissive of black attempts to master the world around them, while also suggesting that, with the proper preparation and presentation, blacks could hope to locate support in both the black and white worlds. Lewis' lack of technical savvy makes him a figure of fun to whites and therefore a sore spot for those blacks trying to create inroads into a greater legitimacy in the eyes of the power brokers and gate-keepers, almost all of whom were white, so as to access those echelons of opportunity that were usually held away from capable blacks by the white establishment's investment in those negative stereotypes. The questions surrounding the parson's financial decision making are seemingly turned over to an automatic assumption that Lewis' prior business dealings were rife with both ignorance and, worse, bad faith. The PCNB's focus was on portraying the cleaving of the judicious from the unsound and there

is a distinct top-down logic that ties in with the DuBoisian talented tenth, the idea that the race's overall position of weakness could be lifted by the guidance provided by experienced, educated leadership.

Leadership must necessarily make certain claims on ability and the right to manage putative subordinates in their interactions with the world at large. The Lewis story offered up the tonic of a vanguard commercial element, a boosterish narrative assuring all readers that the race's progress was attached to men who had a command of the lingua franca of universal, ageless truths, here floating in the fields of science and business, which would, hopefully, outpace racism and the numbing disadvantages of being outside and unconsidered. The petitioning of sources of authority meant to replace the lens of racism and white power with looking manners and methods which would not disqualify based on race did not, of course, mean that disqualification was banished altogether by these bids to imagine and draw out new, more amenable worlds. This is another way of saying that, where there is an effort to present the universal, there is also in tow adherence to particulars that may be unnoticed. Indeed, even as the PCNB piece sought to forward a vision of race competence and readiness for interracial profit-seeking ventures, such was in part based on taking up the reins of surveillance and judgment, coupling race boosterism with corrective, even disciplinary lenses. There can be no surprise in finding the 'progressive' element attempting to don the qualifications which they believed would lead to access and opportunity and, in that same vein, one cannot be startled that the PCNB piece does not fully critique the values and logics behind the assumptions of the power of science and business as related to the efforts of the black masses to chase loftier

ambitions. Johnson's coverage stops short of open contempt or disdain for Lewis' plans but there is no expression of sympathy for his efforts or for his ambitions. It is entirely possible that the good Parson's efforts, including building something that was put into the water, were all a sham meant to manage the expectations of the Church's followers in a way that optimized their availability for exploitation. No charitable perspective need be privileged. But the fact that the PCNB did not even blink in the direction of acknowledging a human story of a man with meager means and abilities doggedly pursuing the realization of his ambition points to some of the pitfalls that were to be encountered by a program of top-down leadership based on proving the race's ability to meet mainstream expectations. It is here that we can see Kevin Gaines' concern that class as morality failed to adequately capture class as economic reality can be clearly observed in action. The relationship between participation and disciplining blackness is writ in bold here and one can make out the difficulty of keeping story telling and surveillance separated. We are also afforded further proof of George Johnson's somewhat stodgy nature, his skepticism for 'creative' business practices such as the serial incorporations allegedly undertaken by Lewis, Micheaux, and a host of others whom he tracked throughout his life.

Johnson did demonstrate that he was familiar with, and even somewhat sympathetic to, the human aspects of 'creative ' business endeavors. The PCNB carried for release the week of July 25, 1927, a story from Eugene, Oregon's *Register* that discussed black culture in terms both specific to the black diasporic experience and in terms more universal in scope. The story is headed by a rather lurid title, 'Witch Doctor,' and is concerned with calling into question the St. Louis indictment of a black man, Dr. Samuel Kojo Pearce, who

was being prosecuted for using the nation's postal system to sell 'voodoo charms' to his customers, or victims, depending on one's perspective.[549] The piece is written in the voice of an avuncular elite looking down with caring wisdom upon the foggy notions of the uneducated, superstitious black masses. The listing of voodoo products made available by the witch doctor was in large part a matter of amusement. Potions for holding in place or regaining lovers, talismans to ward off evil or accrue to the holder good fortune in business, gambling, and love, and 'King Solomon's Wisdom Stone,' which was 'charged with invisible life.'[550]

However, the editorial goes on to note that many of 'us still cherish a lurking belief in the efficacy of the rabbit's foot, a lucky coin and the touching of wood or some other substance of magical virtue' while also noting that, as 'primitive superstitions die hard,' a large number of Americans took 'Indian remedies.' It is likely that the 'us' noted above refers to members of the white race as understood by the anonymous writer. It is interesting to note that the construction of the piece posits modernity as an ideal or set of practices that is not simply synonymous with whiteness as it is noted that the primitive habits of putatively African-American superstition driving Pearce's mail order business were essentially analogous to many such beliefs held in the sphere of whiteness.

This forgiving, even inclusive, perspective is notably absent from a bit in the July 11, 1927 issue of *Time*. The writer, again anonymous, covers much of the same information found in the PCNB release. However, in announcing that 'Negroes sincerely desirous of elevating their race last week agreed that persons promptly reporting other "osteopaths"

[549] 'Witch Doctor,' Microfilm, Reel 10, GPJ Collection.
[550] Ibid.

of "Dr." Pearce's ilk would be performing valuable race service' the magazine both tied the Doctor's questionable business to the entire race and in the same motion isolated blacks as a group and made them available for the type of self-correcting surveillance that we saw in the Lewis piece.[551] In this formulation of black aspirations for upright citizenship the alleged iniquities of one member of the race are presented as a problem threatening the whole of the race and the suggested remedy, the exposure and legal excision of the offending representative of the group, places on an island African Americans, their cultures, and their relationship with mainstream, or white, normative assessments of behavior while bidding that the group attack its own. Access and potential belonging are tied directly to an almost immunological rejection of not only quackery in the stead of mastery, but also rubbings of Africa and popular assumptions regarding tenuous black connections with good, hard science. The author's suggestion that blacks engage in self-policing tactics so as to help 'elevate' the race into alignment with the values held by those also wielding the proverbial fist is more menacing than inviting.

Though the PCNB's handling of the story carried a degree of skepticism, it conveyed a much less punitive air than the *Time* coverage and exhibited a pronounced bent in favor of considering the relationship between culture and commerce as a field of universalist endeavors that found humanity in foibles and superstition, which is to say in assumed relative weaknesses. The differences between the PCNB's coverage of the misguided Parson's failed shipping venture and the witch doctor's troubled mail-order business and that provided by mainstream, national magazines brings into the foreground the ways that

[551] Anonymous, 'Medicine Man,' *Time*, 7/11/1927.

George Johnson's entrepreneurship referenced and then modified mainstream and middle class values and practices in order to story tell of America as the nation was and as the nation could be where race was concerned. The imagined worlds of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company's titles, worlds where blackness in America was expansive enough to sustain the humanity of blacks and their striving for improved lives through partnership and mastery, and the real world of everyday stumblings and masteries reported on by the Pacific Coast News Bureau each sought to access the black community's ability to take narratives and construct pictures of a more accurately conceived blackness along with new possibilities for blacks and the meaning of being black in America. Both of these businesses, short-lived and small by any account, helped to update on a national level a tradition of using story and imagery to create alternate understandings of blackness and humanity and of the American experience with race and justice.

The PCNB ended up servicing between 50 and 100 Negro periodicals over the expanse of the entire nation and the provision of that 'splendid dope from the Coast,' as Romeo Daugherty of New York's Amsterdam News dubbed the bureau's releases, was profitable enough to support the endeavor.[552] George eventually closed the PCNB as he could not afford to pay anyone capable of performing the quality of reporting that he insisted upon and he could not continue to hold down both the government position that anchored his life and the kind of meticulous, ongoing involvement he had with the news service. For that reason the PCNB was abandoned in late 1927. Though the news bureau was founded on a vision of the future, a perception of a black nation hauling itself into being as a

[552] Letter from Romeo Daugherty to the Pacific Coast News Bureau, George P. Johnson, *Collector of Negro Film History*, p. 231

community, the venture's existence was ultimately a matter of profitability and George, like his brothers, chose the privilege of individual comfort zones of stability, regularity, and security over any kind of ongoing personal sacrifice or trudging along for extended periods of time after non-profitability was clear. The ceiling for race advancement via business can come down quickly. Uplift for the race, which is by nature a communal pursuit gauged in the sway of broad changes and cumulative improvements or declension, flows from values and practices that both encompass and diverge from business interests.

Conclusions

This chapter has provided a heretofore neglected close reading of the storytelling content of the films of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company and the almost wholly ignored content of the Pacific Coast News Bureau in order to provide a more exacting understanding of how Noble and George Johnson contributed to the national push for uplift. This set of inquiries at the same time fleshed out the product that they took to market, which is to say narratives of a neglected blackness which revolved around the American Negro's experiences with middle class life and mores. At the core of these stories were assumptions of a black humanity that persisted in seeking out spaces wherein recognition of that humanity, or sources of authority other that race, provided opportunities for material, even social, advancement, which would produce material well-being and, in many instances, justice.

The stories of the LMPC and PCNB repeatedly take us through the process of establishing and applying mastery over the self, the earth, and technology as preambles for effective interaction with the American mainstream, read as whites, and the economic

system that dominated the landscape. Business and property ownership were fields of intense interest for the narratives sold by the Johnson's and those activities were presented as key gauges of the progress the race was making toward full citizenship and better lives as Americans. These tales consistently put blacks and whites in positions of cooperation and conflict while stressing the similarity between members of the two races so as to lay claim to a broader effective black humanity and the rights that that humanity requires on the American landscape.

At the same time, difference was allowed for, as well, as a more pluralist view tended to control the aftermath of interracial interactions. Though assimilationist perspectives were most common, there were also strains of multi-cultural responses to uneven representations of blackness, so it must be kept in mind that the uplift prescribed by the LMPC was multi-faceted in its stratagems for overcoming the deficits created by racism in Progressive Era America. This chapter has prepared us for look into the ways that the Johnson family reflects the arrival of the New Negroes of the early 20th Century, a project of reimaging, reimagining, and reapplying blackness to the American and human experiences of the era which took place on a nationwide basis and which continued to evolve over the remainder of the century.

Chapter 5

Racing Vision: Black Modernity and the Struggle to Address Seeing and Being Seen as Human.

Noble Johnson was 'Known as a Negro,' George Johnson wrote in a November 18, 1970 letter to a friend before burrowing into into another recounting of all of the many non-Negro roles that made up the bulk of his older brother's Hollywood career.[553] The quoted portion reads most obviously as an indication that Noble was understood by others to be a black person, an individual with a blood line that reached back and across the Atlantic to Africa. Those words can also be read as indicating that Noble's celebrity was connected to being known as a black actor, though, as we have seen, the celebrity he enjoyed in Hollywood did not include many overt references to his blackness. When thought about in the context of the juxtaposition between the public knowledge of Noble's blackness and the many characters that he played which were non-black but spoken of as being realistic due to qualities that were attributed to Noble himself, there is an aspect of the words 'known as a Negro' which suggest that there was something more to the actor's person, perhaps something hidden by the fact that he was known to be black. The suggestion behind that reading is that the basis for differentiating between the racial and ethnic classifications that spanned Noble as a person and his various roles was not so easily separated or understood.

[553] Letter from George Johnson to Peggy Bush, 11/18/1970, Box 53, Folder 7, GPJ Collection.

George wrote those words in a letter to a friend which recounted in a bare, skeletal manner the events of his life and those of his siblings, including his sister, who 'lived and died strickly in a Negro atmosphere,' and in doing so the reader can make out his belief that those experiences were of some historical importance the understanding of which required that attention be paid to his family's sense of racial identity.[554] This was not an attempt to merely stake out the actual or claimed racial makeup or makeups of the Johnson family, but instead it was part of an expression of a lifelong conflict with being subject to the confining logics and practices of race. He continued by admitting

> Being raised during my youth in a white family, white playmates and white associates a certain amount of that white atmosphere has been inherited, has become a part of me and though in later years living and married entirely within my own Race I have found it extremely hard to overcome it.[555]

This quote expresses an acceptance of having a race to which George thought of himself as belonging, a blackness that he took on as his own, and at the same time, though the cultural constructs of race in America during the late 19th and early 20th centuries indicated that the races were to be held apart as unalike, whiteness also belonged to him. The fabric of his person was woven with threads of white and black. That state of being, however, had insufficient avenues of expression in the America of the Progressive Era. Indeed, the strictness of the bounds within which his sister lived, amongst blacks her whole life, suggests that the maintenance of the color line required all of the players, white and black, to play their roles with a tenacious discipline which held against any urges to

[554] Ibid.
[555] Ibid.

toward relations that sought to dissolve accepted demarcations of racial difference. The knowledge that George had of himself did and did not comport with his knowledge regarding his race, his range of roles and connections in society, and, though he had largely resided among blacks, that did not allow him to 'overcome,' to correct his sense of belonging in realms beyond blackness. George had developed and come to know himself in an 'atmosphere,' the foggy soup of personal relations that make up community and culture, and his experience was that his blackness, which was only partially a matter of his skin color, did not keep him from coming to know himself through and as a part of an atmosphere of whiteness.

Thomas Holt has described the 'project of modernity' as on 'whose essence was to make sense of a world in which humankind was both the object of knowledge and the author of knowledge.'[556] Race as a cultural construct, Holt followed, was 'itself a kind of knowledge' whose function was at least in part 'to make the world intelligible.'[557] The letter George sent to his friend, indeed the story of the Johnsons itself, suggests that race as a construct, as a reservoir of information about the world, the people in the world, and the ways they relate to one another, can also be a source of distortion which obscures the fullest vision of the individual and collective humanity of those enshrouded by its thrall. The Johnsons' story, and others like it, some of whom have been lightly brushed over in the course of this study, guide our attention to the struggle against the reductions of self and humanity both black and white. This final chapter will seek to look at the place that

[556] Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Race in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000) p. 32-33.
[557] Ibid.

battles to win recognition of the humanity of African Americans has had in the history of black modernity's efforts to move the race and the nation closer to a space where black citizenship and material well-being can be more consistently forwarded. The ways that images of black humanity and its connections to the guarded holds of whiteness will be looked at carefully, though the telling of stories pointing out the connections between whiteness and blackness in certain historically significant moments will also be included. It is hoped that this line of inquiry will both frame the historical place of the business endeavors of Noble and George Johnson while also linking the history of their entrepreneurship with an ongoing flow of intellectual, even psychological, histories that travel with changes in entertainment industry.

The Lincoln Motion Picture Company as a Means of Production of Social and Cultural Knowledge and of Material Well-Being

Walter Benjamin wrote at length about the shift in power and meaning that was created by works of art that were represented in reproducible forms. Benjamin considered there to be two positions from which works of art established meaning and played into power relations between the mass of viewers and those who controlled the exhibition of the image. The first was an 'auratic' position representing a relatively singular or limited set of meanings grounded in cultic practices and attached to particular spaces which were not easily amended by the physical removal of the art piece from one place to another.[558] The uniqueness of the image or the object, along with the space that it inhabited, lent the

[558] Walter Benjamin, Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, eds., *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (New York: Belknap Press, 2008), pp. 19-27.

power of access to those controlling the process of viewing the art in a particular, ritualistic setting. The power of presentation accrued to the few most closely connected with the exhibitor, such as religious or political leaders. The ability to reproduce a work of art meant the removal of the art product from the corseted spaces of more or less pure ritual and cultish viewings to the much messier, potentially democratic realms of the viewing public's own haunts. The mass, repetitive exhibitory aspects of reproducible art radically diminished the 'authenticity' of the art object as a meaning-making property of the piece.[559] Benjamin was speaking of a reassessment of reality, a potential reworking of power relations based on new perceptions of positionality which admit new horizons. Benjamin indicated that the 'stripping of the veil from the object' helped to usher in an unprecedented process wherein 'the alignment of reality with the masses and of the masses with reality' sent waves rippling through the social fabric.[560]

Thomas Levin has explained Benjamin's conception of the 'star' as a visible example of a person taking on and mastering the machines which constitute the modes of production controlled by the dominant, capital-rich class. The star, in producing images and expressions of a shared humanity while being burdened and bullied by the mechanisms of film-making, is taken in by the viewers as a reflection of a human victory over those modes of productions which the general population tend to experience as restricting and overbearing.[561] Levin suggested that, in the framework of considering film a potential

[559] Ibid.
[560] Ibid., p. 24.
[561] Thomas Y. Levin, 'Film,' in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, by Walter Benjamin; Michael W. Jennings,

locus of capital implementing modes of production that, once appropriated by the masses, lead to a progression beyond capital's power, 'shock training by the cinema can be read as preparation for a new technical mastery that could, at least potentially, be enlisted in the service of a progressive project.'[562]

Thinking about the Lincoln Motion Picture company as a business endeavor intent on accessing mass audiences via a new technology which was to generate profits in part by generating new public images and imaginings of blackness shake loose two separate but it some ways overlapping and similar sets of productive modes. One mode of production produced social and cultural knowledge bundled up in concepts of race, and therefore the power relations and experiences that flow therefrom. Another mode produced material output and the power relations and experiences that flow therefrom. African Americans in the Progressive Era, and no doubt before and after, tried to take control of streams of production coming out of those modalities simultaneously and on an ongoing basis so as to advance their individual and collective well-being. There were competing ideas about how the modes of production constructing race were to be addressed and there were differing facets to the question.

The story of the Johnsons and the LMPC suggests at least two logical strands that came out of the address of the issues of race and blackness. One strand was based on attempting to rehabilitate the image of people who were considered black, to try to redefine in a positive light the meaning of blackness and the place of African Americans in the nation's

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Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, eds., Cambridge, Mass., New York, N.Y., Belknap Press, 2008, pp. 315-320.

[562] Ibid., p. 318.

broader society. Examples of this strategy or vein of thinking can be seen in the Lincoln films' presentation of imagery that showed blacks in professional positions moving though middle class settings or as patriotic, military heroes. The other strand was one that sought to bypass, background, or reframe the discussion of blackness by basing the relations being pursued, especially with whites, on other sets of value and authority such as shared humanity, including the nation's egalitarian traditions and most inclusive concepts of human right, the laws of the United States, or Patriotism's esprit de corps.

Focusing on the humanity of people who were considered black in an attempt to defang race or banish it from this or that set of relations, both narrow and broad, was a deep play, to borrow anthropologist Clifford Geertz' term for gambits laden with profound social and cultural values not readily available for observation by eyes that are not part of the player's culture.[563] The LMPC films, advertisements, and the stardom of Noble Johnson provided opportunities or invited African American consumers to engage their humanity as something that could be privileged by the obscuring or devaluation of race as a source of knowledge and authority effecting decision-making in relations between individuals and groups. Promotional materials that forwarded Noble as being able to easily appear as other than black on screen and subject matter that focused on the American-ness of blacks fighting alongside whites against non-American, alien forces are examples of approaches which respectively tended to promote the submerging of race or a focus on commonalities stemming from shared values and interests.

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[563] Clifford Geertz, 'Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,' *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, N.Y., 1973, 412-453.

Part of the Lincoln strategy had to do with how blacks approached and prepared for participation in the economic system of their day, which is to say that part of addressing blackness involved addressing the way capital maintenanced the modes of production of material output and consumption. The pursuit of profits and the advancement of material well-being through business endeavors was an engagement of capitalism which carried the goals of creating wealth on the material front and belonging on the socio-cultural front, the latter being accomplished even as the exigencies of the Progressive Era required that blacks pursue those goals under segregated circumstances. As we have seen, segregation had two sides where this discussion is concerned: one which opened opportunities for advancements in the ways blackness was understood on local and national levels while also giving rise to new national commercial avenues and another which could cut those avenues off from adequate means of growth while also working to maintain distance between the races.

As whites dominance rendered whiteness as the standard and blackness as a sign of pathology which cradled fantasies and mythologies of white superiority and black inferiority, blacks increasingly lived in a world where addressing the 'white-produced blackness,' as Grace Elizabeth Hale referred to this process in her *Making Whiteness*, meant that blacks became entangled in not simply being black, but also making a new, alternative blackness or ranges of ideas about blackness that could be seen and interacted with by both blacks and whites.[564] In a world where purchasing power was an indication of well-being, a white supremacy that wished to maintain blackness in positions of

[564] Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999). p. 182.

degradation and subservience could be expected to be loathe to accept black consumption of goods and services that were on par with those enjoyed by even the lowest of whites.[565]

However, any level of conspicuous consumption on the part of African Americans which was broadcast in the black community had the potential to communicate upward mobility and advancement for the entire group and therefore had the potential to establish consumption as a defeat of white power and its efforts to marginalize and dehumanize blacks. Conspicuous consumption, especially invidious consumption meant to enforce class stratifications in society, has a negative connotation in most minds. Here the term points to a rehabilitative consumption of redefinition which, while to some degree accepting and continuing to work within a classed society, nonetheless wishes to defeat rigid boundaries and prohibitions on class mobility anchored in racialized ideas of who can and cannot participate. Both top-down and up-from-under dynamics were involved with the strain of conspicuous consumption being addressed in this dissertation and being or imagining being seen, even seeing others beings seen, during the consumption and use of desired goods and services was central to the experience and effect. The Lincoln Company was part of a multi-faceted push for expanded spaces of African-American efficacy that wound attempts to reconstitute the atmospheres in which relationships of material production and consumption tightly with the ways that blacks humanity and belonging played in those spheres.

Mary Carbine, in addressing the black theater-going experience of the early-Hollywood period, tackled the question of whether the on-screen production of images

[565] Hale, *Making Whiteness*, p. 179.

and knowledge represented by mainstream cinema could be thought of as assimilating Negroes in the way that it brought European immigrants into the American fold. Carbine relied on Lizabeth Cohen's handling of the 'embourgeoisement thesis' and described such as an interpretation of the power of mass cultural consumption to box immigrants into patterns of assimilation and a dissipating cultural identity that was subsumed by mainstream, middle class mores.[566] Carbine has posited that Progressive Era African American practices of consuming mass culture, which is to say those entertainment artifacts mass produced and distributed on a wide basis, managed to solidify evolving black cultures that came out of culturally specific backgrounds. These were cultural stirrings, such as listening to black-produced music or viewing films in spaces such as theaters which were designated as outposts of localized black culture, which staved off the unchallenged obscuring of class distinctions and the homogenizing effects of mass cultural consumption as described in the embourgeoisement thesis.[567] Carbine therefore found that 'in creating popular culture…which arises from the interface of mass culture and the "practices of everyday life…socially and economically subordinated people can use mass cultural products as material resources for oppositional activities and the assertion of social difference.'[568]

Because Carbine's position is reliant on an assumption that blacks will not have the ability or wherewithal to produce films, it is useful to hold her critique of the

[566] Mary Carbine, '"The Finest Outside the Loop": Motion Picture Exhibitions in Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1905-1928,' *Camera Obscura*, Volume 8, No. 2 23, 1990, p. 11; Lizabeth Cohen, 'Encountering Mass Culture in the Grass Roots: The Experience of Chicago Workers in the 1920s,' *American Quarterly*, 41.1, 1987, p. 7.
[567] Carbine, '"The Finest Outside the Loop,"' p. 11.
[568] Ibid., quoting John Fiske, 'Popular Forces and the Culture of Everyday Life

embourgeoisement thesis against the example of the LMPC as their control of the means of film production created a circumstance wherein their use of middle class mores and varying strategies addressing the production of raced cultural and social knowledge signal their material productions on a plane that also approximates material culture which worked to uncover existent aspects of the race and its collective ambitions rather than simply crushing one cultural set of expressions for another. The Lincoln films were expressions of black American-ness which, incomplete as they were, still constituted a meaningful departure from having aspects of the race endlessly hammered into unseen crevices on the margins.

With that perspective in mind, the Lincoln company's concomitant use of jazz bands and black spaces noted by Carbine suggests a reclaiming process within broader dynamics that also floated more orthodox instances of assimilationist positions. The LMPC used presentations of black cultural formations to provide a greater range of entertainment value for their customers, to draw customers by offering the types of consumer experiences with familiar culture to which Carbine was pointing, and in pursuit of a business success that would materially enrich the owners while also allowing them through that success to address the modes of knowledge production which constituted the meaning of race.

The Lincoln combination of jazz bands and Afro-American orchestras which played to white houses and black houses alike in preparation for the exhibition of films that often overtly championed images and practices of black middle class living and stories of African Americans moving outside of the confines of black communities presented an overall

product that asserted blackness could be celebrated as multi-faceted in ways that embraced aspects of the mainstream and dominant society for its own ends. This was not solely a matter of racial caste systems based on lighter or darker pigmentation, though there were such caste dynamics, and this does not appear to have been merely a class-related issue whereby the only champions of the Lincoln titles were, as Carbine describes bourgeois-leaning blacks, those that thought more in terms of their economic status than their racial status.[569] Indeed, in the context of trying to show blacks as they really were, which is to say, to present blackness as something that could move in the realms of whiteness while remaining black, though not necessarily accepted by whites, the Lincoln cinema can be seen as one which wishes to rehabilitate race even while also obviating the need to rely on that type of authoritative knowledge. In that sense the cinema of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company was one of opposition to those aspects of race meant to truncate black options, mobility, and panoramas of relationships breeding economic power.

The desire to use film to wrest away from the mainstream control over the means of production outputting cultural and social knowledge in the form of race necessarily involved notable commitments to recasting the black public image as it concerned the modes of material production. The LMPC was not, however, on the vanguard of the battle over the modes of material production themselves as they practiced those modes of production and aspired to do so as part of the broader capitalist system. In other words, they were trying to find or construct an American set of cultural, social, and material

[569] Ibid.

means of production that abided by class and not race, the achievement of the latter then allowing headway in the more positive experiences of the former. This reading of the LMPC's apparent strategy for forwarding black humanity and participation in the American experiment rearranges or makes more multi-directional the flow of intention in Kevin Gaines' formulation that black elites in the uplift era ended up primarily 'striving for bourgeois respectability in the absence of rights and freedom.'[570]

Gaines also stated that 'the desire for recognition of one's humanity is a natural impulse in a childhood world innocent of race' and then noted that the hard memory of emotional cuts suffered upon 'pain of rejection by white peers or schoolmates produces a retelling that not only renounces that desire for recognition,' but also begins to hold whiteness to account, to doubt the veracity of its claims on supremacy.[571] While there can be no question that striving endlessly for recognition of one's humanity from an audience that has set hard against such a recognition is absurd, even damaging, and while the development of a critique of whiteness, and I would argue any purely inherited formulation of blackness, is to be expected and considered as healthy, the wholesale renunciation of the quest for a recognized humanity, for circumstances wherein that humanity can flourish and engage other individuals in ways that sideline race and promote well-being for the individual or group is a response that offers the humanity that remains a poverty of options. Moreover, as has been suggested above, working to have the humanity of blackness recognized is a strategic part of address the production modes of

[570] Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p. 16.
[571] Ibid., 47.

social and cultural knowledge and there is a historical thread of which the LMPC is a part that suggests that the path of searching for recognition of black humanity does traverse into the power relations that confront white supremacist power.

Before the Lincoln Motion Picture Company: Early Cinematic Presentations of Black Humanity

The urge to respond to negative stereotypes of blacks, along with the hunger to see spectacles of black triumph, no doubt predated the advent of film and catalyzed various usages of film meant to correct or more favorably present blackness. Before William Foster, the race film industry's first entrant, made a comedy or D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* sent African Americans scrambling to both the dark room and local censorship boards, Booker T. Washington had begun trying to produce educational films depicting positive images of blacks engaged in activities which comported with the Tuskegee philosophy of right-behavior and priorities within the race.[572] A pictorial about Tuskegee was created in 1910 and another in 1913. Though neither were financial successes, Louis Harlan reports that the response in the black press was favorable and Washington would continue to promote film as a way to reimagine and re-present blackness, including throwing some of his support for the ill-fate *Birth of a Race*.[573]

Filmic depictions of black heavyweight champion Jack Johnson defeating white opponents, especially the footage of his 1910 Independence Day victory over 'Great White Hope' Jim Jeffries, were extremely popular with black audiences and, when riots erupted

[572] Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: Volume 2: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915* (New York: The University of Oxford Press, 1983), p. 434.
[573] Ibid.

across the nation as a result of the outcome, the perceptions regarding film's ability to recast the relative positions of the black and white races, and to therefore give rise to rioting, was such that federal courts legislated bans on public presentations of boxing films.[574] Gerald Butters has noted that 'Johnson's repeated victories over white opponents, as captured on celluloid, challenge the hegemonic order of early silent film,' not to mention white supremacist dogma.[575] Blacks soaked up the chance to engage with events that seemed to be based on displays of ability and mastery that could not be capture by racism even as it was presumed that the outcomes spoke for the two races involved. Davarian Baldwin noted that African-American expenditures on viewing and betting on the films were considerable, the wagers allowing money to speak the race's pride and Johnson's victories allowing redistribution along racial lines of between $150,000 and $500,000.[576] Johnson's abilities to physically best white males recast black masculinity and humanity in a new light which furthered a sense of a new, nationally recognized understanding of what it meant to be black in America. African Americans were given the opportunity through betting to communicate their belief in a shared humanity with whites that bore comparison, competition, and the possibility of instances of superiority being undeniably played out by a black person. These triumphs were then a source of profit as the moving

[574] For an excellent overview of the films of Jack Johnson's boxing matches see Dan Streible, 'Race and the Reception of Jack Johnson Fight Films,' in Daniel Bernardi, Ed., *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996), pp. 170-202.
[575] Gerald Butters, *Black Manhood on the Silent Screen* (Lawrence, Kansas: The University of Kansas Press, 2002), pp. 44-50.
[576] Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), pp. 2-7.

picture imagery of Johnson for a time allowed African Americans to relive and reinforce the great heavyweight's victories and their own successes at book.

Images of the New Negro: The Harlem Renaissance and Art as a Window into Black Humanity

The New Negro Movement as it began in Harlem in the 1920s was centered on cultural products as examples of Negro improvement and worthiness. The goal was, as David Levering Lewis put it, 'to redeem through art' the standing' of African Americans in the United States.[577] The New Negroes were not, however, indifferent to the economic participation and gains made by the race. Alain Locke's anthology, *The New Negro*, emphatically planted the nascent movement's flag and included a chapter by E. Franklin Frazier which covered the economic advancement of Durham, North Carolina's African American population.[578] The foremost concern of the piece was to establish that the Negro had produced a thriving middle class populace whose values were moderate and shared across the subcultural bounds of the nation.[579]

The Negro was 'new' in part because his economic status and acumen was coming around in ways that made black life look more and more like that of any other group, especially whites. Frazier posited that this could be best seen in the city's top black-owned and operated business, the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, and he

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[577] David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue* (New York: Penguin, 1979 (1997)), p. 90.
[578] E. Franklin Frazier, 'Durham: Capital of the Black Middle Class,' Alain Locke, Ed., *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Touchstone, 1925 (1997)), pp. 333-340.
[579] Ibid., p. 335

crowned that venture the 'greatest monument to Negroes' business enterprise in America.'[580] Like George Johnson so often did when covering the race's economic advancements and struggles through the Pacific Coast News Bureau, Frazier relied on the display of raw numbers to allow the reader to more completely imagine the successes that modern black management decision making had engendered with North Carolina Mutual. He noted that, as North Carolina Mutual diversified its holding across the nation, had accumulated '$42,000,000 of insurance in force,' and had command of more that $2,000,000 in assets.[581]

The chapter used the character and ability of the man who began the insurance company's rise from uncertainty, John Merrick, to marry a solid moral base to upward mobility and elite status. Merrick was described as having risen from a birth in slavery by using the Bible to build literacy and hard work to expand his boot blacking operation to a barber shop which, granting him proximity to powerful local whites, allowed him access to money and business know-how which were not usually found in the black community.[582] Frazier's presentation of Merrick's background thusly provided a sort of causal chain of events leading from patient accumulation and probity to engaging whiteness in ways that abetted his plans for financial improvement. Indeed, in quoting Merrick's biographer, T. McCants Andrews' assessment that the barber's 'contact with the leading businessmen of Durham had as much to do with his success as his own personal gifts,' Frazier linked persistence, moral uprightness, and shrewdness in business to interactions with the

[580] Ibid. p. 335.
[581] Ibid. p. 336.
[582] Ibid. p. 334.

dominant class in ways that frame at least some level of interracial synergy as practically indispensible to black business designs.[583]

Frazier's account of Merrick places his contribution to the onset of the New Negro Movement rather firmly upon roots that reach back to the uplift ideologies that we have repeatedly spoken of over the course of this dissertation. In the context of a book which was seeking to demonstrate the readiness of black elites to take up spaces of humanity previously connected only with whiteness, especially cultural spaces, the desire to describe black advancement in middle class, every-man terms sounds out as a communication aimed at creating paths for movement between classes based on shared human values.

Locke's expression of the questions and misapprehensions the New Negro was contending with included worries over the ways that the humanity of Negroes was perceived. He stated early in his essay entitled 'The New Negro' that 'for generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being'[584] The idea or image of the black race as it was ceaselessly turned over and examined in the collective mind of the nation was close to the heart of the matter for Locke and his emphasis on cultural product was undertaken as a matter of improving the interactions between elite whites and blacks who, it was assumed, had for too long ignored their shared interests and tastes.[585]

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[583] Ibid.
[584] Alain Locke, 'The New Negro,' Locke, Ed., *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Touchstone, 1925 (1997)), p. 3.
[585] Ibid., p. 6.

For Locke, the ghettoization of blacks created an opportunity for the race to more completely coalesce, to more completely engage blackness in America in much the way segregation allowed the proliferation of black business. In turn, the black mind was becoming clearer about itself and blackness. The black man was better able to work toward being understood by other races 'for precisely what he is' and such allowed the disparate groups to 'face each other to-day with the possibility at least of entirely new mutual attitudes.'[586] Again, a hope for the power of synergy, here in the realm of cultural production, was seen as a path toward improved relations between the races. Regarding the New Negro black arts shock troops, Locke believed that the 'recognition they win should in turn prove the key to that revaluation of the Negro which must precede or accompany an considerable further betterment of race relationships.'[587] Recognizing that the changes the race sought in their status under the American Democracy might not be won within that generation's lifespan, he was comforted by the view that a fuller experience of black humanity would nonetheless arise and 'with it a spiritual Coming of Age.'[588]

This search to elevate the humanity of blackness, both within and without of the Negro race, was most notably undertaken on the front of literature during the 1920s. Nonetheless, part of the battle was to dismantle stereotypes and the plague of negative imagery that continually worked to undergird the marginalization African-American designs on improved relations and citizenship. As Martha Jane Nadell has noted in *Enter*

[586] Ibid., p. 8.
[587] Ibid., p. 15.
[588] Ibid., p. 16.

the New Negroes, her study of the graphic art of the Harlem Renaissance, Locke saw visual art and representation as a primary weapon.[589] The fixity of racial stereotypes, the cramped spaces that such flat and uncomplicated renditions of a people created, led Locke to early on insist on imagery which reflected the variability of blackness within the setting of the American, urban throb of Harlem. Racism sought to bunch a single people with a presumed range of difference that was negligible, but the outcome was a great array of hues, attitudes, talents, and personalities that were considered proof of the humanity of the race.

Locke used several artists to provide drawings or graphics that, in their array of subjects and approaches, would help to disseminate what he considered a truer picture of the Harlem community, which was to stand in as a representative metropolis for black potential. Locke's first iteration of the New Negro position was published in *Survey Graphic*, a periodical which addressed varying social issues of the time, and its editor, Paul Kellog, took up Locke's call for a 'serious American Portraiture' of blacks, in Nadell's words, led him to encourage German-American Artist Winold Reiss to do a series of portrait sketches based on the idea of 'types' of Negro personhoods previously only seldom seen in the world of whites.[590] Reiss drew seven such 'types' for a spread inside the magazine and each of them were titled without reference to any personal information regarding the subjects. They were simply referred to as 'Mother and Child,' 'A College Lad,'

[589] Martha Jane Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes: Images of Race in American Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 48.
[590] Ibid., pp. 44,45.

'Girl in the White Blouse,' and so forth.[591] The depictions were realistic as far as the faces were concerned, though the details of the clothing were not including beyond some hints of drape to provide mass, approach that drew focus to the faces. There was no ambiguity to the race of these subjects. While not necessarily dark-skinned, none of the subjects were really light-skinned, an aspect of appearance, including quite straight hair, that Weiss would faithfully portray in later works.[592] The subjects often had obviously kinky hair, broad noses, and thick lips.[593] The elements of common stereotypes were not hidden. In contravention of the smiling, happy-go-lucky stereotypes that portrayed African Americans as buffoons, these portraits evince no smiles and instead relied on almost emotionless pensiveness to create a visage of intellectual, spiritual, and even psychological gravity.

An inset about Reiss suggested that his portraits had managed to straddle both 'type' and 'individuality' while also combining the 'human' and the 'racial and local,' which hints at the tricky balance that the imagery was attempting to strike.[594] Blackness was to be expanded as a concept or lens through which the humanity of the subjects could be viewed, but their blackness was not to be obscured, either. The spread started with 'Congo: A Familiar of New York Studios,' whose hair seems to literally vibrate out into the frizzy ends of an afro, the subject's countenance less intense and downcast than the others, staring straight at the reader, and the head by itself against a white backdrop lent the

[591] Ibid., pp. 46,47.
[592] A portrait of Ellie Johnson McDougald, the last of 'Four Portraits of Negro Women,' in Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 147
[593] Ibid., pp. 139-142.
[594] Ibid.

image the hypnotizing effect of an abstraction that might have existed in the viewer's mind. The 'Congo' title suggests that the subject was African while the lone biographical note of the group suggests that the multiplicity of Harlem was truly diasporic as the subject was well known to the city's art scene. The end drawing was the aforementioned 'A College Lad,' who handsomely wears a three piece suit, his hair somewhat straightened, combed neatly and parted, an observant gaze peering into an off-right distance.[595] Between these strong masculine types were portraits of three women, including 'A Woman Lawyer,' a boy, and a girl.[596]

There was a purposeful range of social stations assigned to the types. Nadell quoted the *Graphic's* associate editor as having indicated to Locke that 'The college lad is the type farthest removed from the man from the Congo…a wide span between the two.'[597] It was not made explicit in the magazine's text what the expanse of types represented other than variety. However, when attending to 'Congo' and 'A College Lad,' the clear indication is that class was the marker. One was associated with Africa and had no body to otherwise help connote his station, and the other is title-located in a more richly detailed world of education, upward mobility, and material plenty. Anne Elizabeth Carroll has argued that the gendered and class messages located in these portraits should be read as having accomplished a certain complexity as, despite the claims of a great range between the African and the scholar, the distances notable between 'A Woman Lawyer,' buttoned up high with a conservative collar and hair in a timid bob pulled off the face, and the

[595] Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes*, p. 49.
[596] Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro*, pp. 140, 141.
[597] Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes*, p. 48.

nondescript 'Girl in the White Blouse,' who represented a member of the masses, was not so obvious or gaping.[598] Carroll went on to note that, with one of Locke's major points being the establishment of the similarity of the white and black elites, the implied proximity of the black elites and the masses meant 'the black folk and white elite are not so far apart either.'[599]

The manner in which Locke, Frazier, Reiss, and the *Survey Graphic* went about trying to maneuver black humanity into the forefront of considerations of the race share a number of touch points with the strategies used by the Johnsons and their business ventures. The need to demonstrate variety and the presence of business and middle class endeavors were aimed directly at creating a greater likelihood of proximity between black and white elites and the belief was that such closeness could lead to realizations of and relations based on shared values. The raw materials were thought of as already existing in each camp. It was simply a matter of demonstration and recognition. The rehabilitation of the black public image was a product and cause of recovery. However, the differences are just as important to acknowledge. The most obvious is that, where the New Negroes of the Harlem Renaissance were aided by industrial strength white wealth and wished to create art which could be patronized with muted concern over profitability, the Lincoln Motion Picture Company and the Pacific Coast News Bureau were entrepreneurial affairs that required profit to sustain and were effectively locked out of both big money and the distribution schemes necessary for industrial filmmaking.[600] There were no 'Negrotarians'

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[598] Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro*, p. 143.
[599] Ibid.
[600] Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, pp. 98, 99.

like Florenz Ziegfeld or Julius Rosenwald in Hollywood and the shared interest in fighting bigotry that existed between blacks and Jews existing in the North-South axis did not apply with any meaningful strength in the cut-throat world of producing and exhibiting moving pictures for profit.[601]

The pictorial from the *Survey Graphic* also demonstrated that there would be a more effort in the New Negro movement to explicitly bridge the gap between the folk and the elites. The LMPC and PCNB did not make concerted efforts to either present or discuss the masses of the race and made little more effort in the way of including updated and complicating presentations of black womanhood. As we have seen, the Johnson's worldview was cultivated in extremely masculinized circumstances wherein the mother was absent and the family given to undertakings that were almost wholly within the male purview. Further, while the *Graphic* and the Johnson stories relied on presenting 'types' as a way of introducing new visions of the Negro into the pool of black public imagery, the Johnsons were almost totally consumed by the desire to show middle class life and excluded most mentions or attentions paid to those who were not representative of the elite. In that way the limits of the LMPC film catalogue to get at depictions of blacks of the Progressive Era as they 'really were' are made plain by visual layouts that came just a few years after the company folded.

[601] Ibid., pp. 98-103, regarding 'Negrotarians,' the 'Niggerati,' and connections between the Harlem Renaissance's black arts and their Jewish sponsors.

Home Movies and the 'Reality' of Black Life: The Films of the Reverend S. S. Jones

The use of film cameras to capture desirable images of African American lives and humanity during the 1920s was not solely within the purview of commercial race film ventures like the Lincoln Motion Picture Company. By 1923 Kodak had produced a 16mm film stock that was of a size that allowed its use with smaller, lightweight cameras that promoted home movie production.[602] The cost for the camera and film outfit was about $325.[603] Other camera outfits that were more bulky were also available. In 1924 a circuit preacher and successful businessman, the Reverend Solomon Sir Jones of Oklahoma, former slave, began making home movies when travelling to the 15 churches he serviced.[604] By 1928 Jones had made 29 films which included his travels to other states in the North, South, and Southwest of the U.S. and his travels abroad to Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.[605] Jones likely showed the films to his congregations, probably in rooms where they had seem Lincoln titles, and they constituted a truly unique and wondrous chronicle of the era's black communities, especially those in Oklahoma.

Heather Norris Nicholson has written that economic class can be expected to creep into the subtext of home movies as 'what we see is filtered through the eyes of those with access to camera equipment,' their pre-existing views of 'social groups' leading them to

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[602] Allan Kattelle, 'A Brief History of Amateur Film Gauges and Related Equipment, 1899-2001,' Northeast Historic Film site, http://oldfilm.org/content/brief-history-amateur-film-gauges-and-related-equipment-1899-2001.
[603] Ibid.
[604] 'Solomon Sir Jones Films, 1924-1928,' Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library web page, Yale University, http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/collections/highlights/solomon-sir-jones-films-1924-1928. All 29 of the films are publicly available for viewing at this site, though there is minimal additional information about Jones.
[605] Ibid.

mediate what they capture on film.[606] The willfulness of using a camera, of deciding to turn it on and grab images from 'reality,' is present regardless of professional or amateur status. To one degree or another a picture can comment on the one manipulating the camera as much as it provides illumination on the subject. This would seem to be true of the Jones footage as there appears to have been a wealth of imagery showing blacks enjoying material success reflected in the ownership of businesses, the latest automobiles, including an impressive procession of Packards promenading down the main thoroughfare of a town, nice clothes, hats, and jewelry, uniformed parades, large churches, and tremendous and productive oil derricks on the grounds of lovely private homes.[607] Several instances of commencement ceremonies at black schools are also included. These images appear to indicate that the Reverend was interested in recording the economically stable and successful aspects of black life and the uplift sensibility that comes off the footage includes African Americans involved in church life, which follows the tendency to conflate morality and class which has already been shown as a prominent aspect of uplift ideology. However, the films also include footage of economically marginal African Americans that provides a fuller picture of the black communities involved and raises the air of a demonstration of how uplift works.

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[606] Heather Norris Nicholson, '"As If By Magic": Authority, Aesthetics, and visions of the Workplace in Home Movies, Circa 1931-1949,' in Karen Ishizuka and Patricia Zimmermann, Eds., *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories* (Berkley, California: University of California Press, 2008), p. 216.

[607] 'Solomon Sir Jones Films, 1924-1928'; Also consulted for a modest amount of background on the films was an interview with the man who brought the films to light, historian Currie Ballard, who noted the productivity of some of the oil derricks, 'African-American Communities in 1920s Oklahoma,' C-SPAN site, http://www.c-span.org/video/?305773-1/africanamerican-communities-1920s-oklahoma.

The Jones footage is quite reminiscent of many of the images that come to mind when considering the life the Johnsons lived and the films they made. These home movies even depict black cowboys riding horses amongst the derricks of Oklahoma and the commonality of focus on material markers of black progress, well being (after the Tulsa Riot), and uprightness are obvious. It seems likely that Jones saw at least some of the Lincoln productions. Given the content of the amateur reels, it seems clear that, regardless of any influence the professional works from the race film industry may have had on Jones, both the LMPC and Jones were influenced by their interest in black middle class living and committing to film the circumstances they observed in those milieus.

The closeness between the Lincoln and Jones films brings to mind the instability of the divide between the 'real' and the 'performed' and Peter Forges has noted that home movies present a particularly vibrant and multi-layered instance of self-mimesis, wherein one plays the role of oneself, suddenly self-consciously aware of being captured being, looking into the lens and seeing an indeterminate gaze from an indeterminate future as one presents for an other who is understood to be 'posterity.'[608] The subjects of the Jones reels often paraded by the camera, looking into the lens, laughing nervously and waving as they provided a visual proof for the ages. When the Lincoln production team lined up their shots, fixed lighting, and carried out rehearsed actions under the command of 'Action!,' they were remaking or modeling a replica of reality in ways that were fundamentally similar to processes of capturing a putatively unrehearsed 'reality,' and what is more,

[608] Peter Forges, 'Wittgenstein Tractatus: Personal Reflections on Home Movies' in Karen Ishizuka and Patricia Zimmermann, Eds., *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories* (Berkley, California: University of California Press, 2008), p. 52, 53.

though the audience would likely have been able to tell the difference between 'acting' for fictive narrative goals and 'acting' as oneself in a home movie narrative of 'reality,' both would be processed on some level as reproductions of reality that conversed with memories of 'actual reality.' The Jones films drive home forcefully the connections between the Johnsons' lived life, observations of life, and the desire to put on screen images that reflected those memories and the imagined future those recollections suggested were possible. In both the Jones films and the LMPC titles there was a clear desire to show audiences and themselves how blacks really were and could be in the progression of time in America.

Images of Non-Threat and the Construction of Interracial Cooperation in the Face of White Supremacy

In 1941, prior to America's entry into World War II, A. Philip Randolph threatened a march on Washington that aimed to pressure the government to integrate the armed forces and to provide work for blacks in the military industrial complex. The result, even before an actual march could take place, was Executive Order No. 8802, which brought into existence the Fair Employment Practices Commission and, arguably, a swifter end to segregation in the armed forces.[609] The spirit of patriotism which rose in the black community during the onset of America's involvement in the Second World War was matched by increases in the instances of black leadership pressing white decision-makers to favorably alter their practices where the unequal or unflattering treatment of blacks

[609] Paula F. Pfeiffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University, 1996), pp. 49-51.

was concerned. This push for a better place in society included a negotiated agreement from some of Hollywood's top executives to in the future forego the negative representations of blackness that had been staples of mainstream film since the curtains were first pulled back on the medium. According to Thomas Cripps, in addition to the groundwork for the inclusion of blacks as crew employees, the buffoonery of watermelon mania, chicken thieving, and pleased and pleasing simpering was to be set aside in favor of admittedly peripheral roles that would nonetheless begin to 'treat Negro life with greater perception' while depicting blacks in 'positions…they could reasonable be expected to occupy in society.'[610] In short, pursuing greater access and equality in Hollywood, in the realm of motion pictures, involved the recognition and presentation of more accurate portrayals of black experiences and efforts in the nation. The old battle cry of the race film industry was being taken up by the big production houses, albeit weakly, and the connection between having the humanity of blacks recognized remained central.

In 1942, one of A. Philip Randolph's primary co-sponsors of the proposed march on Washington, Bayard Rustin, boarded a Jim Crow bus in Louisville, Kentucky in order to be transported to Nashville, Tennessee. Defying convention and law, he sat near the front of the bus and, when ordered to move to the rear, he refused, explaining that, if he did so, he would be obstructing the right of a young white boy who was seated nearby to have 'knowledge that there is injustice here.'[611] When Rustin's ongoing refusal to comply with

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[610] Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977 (1993)), pp. 1, 350.
[611] Bayard Rustin, 'I Have a Right to Sit Here,' from *Reporting Civil Rights: Part One: American Journalism, 1941-1963* (New York: Library Classics of the United States, Inc., 2003), pp. 15-18.

the dictates of segregation led his to absorb a physical beating, he retorted with the principle of upholding justice, but did not use physical violence in any of sort.[612] Rustin believed strongly that his stance of non-violence led to his being championed by an elderly white man who followed him to the police station to make certain the protester was treated justly and an ultimate release wherein the District Attorney referred to him as '*Mister* Rustin.'[613]

The use of non-violence was not just a refusal to lash out physically, of course, it was a strategy which led Rustin to adhere to, even heighten his insistence on, being recognized as a human like the whites on the bus, a human who justice would see enjoying the same rights as those whites. In addition to making it clear that the meaning of his own rights were absolutely intertwined with those of the young white man, which is to say with the future of the rights of white humanity, Rustin recounted other subtle ploys meant to build human connections with some of the individuals within the white bloc that Jim Crow presupposed as separate and unlike the black objector. At one point he asked a young policeman who had shown an inability to look Rustin in the eye for help with the spelling of a word, thereby bringing the nervous officer that much closer to his position. That officer later corroborated Rustin's account of the events that led him to the District Attorney and was thereby instrumental in helping Rustin achieve an exit that included some acknowledgment of Rustin's dignified humanity.[614] Establishing the recognition of shared values, such as Rustin's biblical note-taking during the incident, led to the

[612] Ibid.
[613] Ibid.
[614] Ibid.

recognition of his humanity by some of those present and that, in turn led to a shift in the array of power he faced, which meant a shift in the applicability of racial injustice. Rustin essentially made allies of certain whites by bringing them to perceive him as having more in common with them than the value system behind Jim Crow. Placing the event on the level of a shared humanity was a strategic coup that involved but was not limited to efforts aimed at having his humanity recognized.

But Rustin did not simply perform these acts of protest and non-violence, he wrote about them as a journalist, entering the event into the collective lore of the nation's experience with race and justice. Words were used to create a sequence that could be followed, a scenario, as it were, wherein the letters on the page evoked strong imagery which reminded the reader of similar events in the reader's own past (even if fragmented or notably less harrowing), and the experience of Bayard Rustin begins to become part of the personal knowledge of the reader. As the narrative unfolded, Rustin led the reader by adding an ingredient to the story that helped to make the role of each player more clear to the audience. That ingredient was a foil, a 'bad guy,' and, for once, the foil was not the Negro. Rather, in this play, as the Negro insisted on justice for himself and the whites, the foils took up their parts by harassing and assaulting the Negro and thereby marking themselves as outliers. With the power of the system laid bare and brought to the fore against actions and attitudes that were familiar and valued to those supposedly in ownership of that system of power, new alliances were found and the will to enforce the separateness demanded by segregation was stilled, even if only for that moment. Non-violence told a story that produced knew objects of knowledge regarding the meaning of

blackness relative to whiteness and the humanity that they shared. In this way non-violent narrative and imagery cut right to one of the main arteries feeding the heart of racism: control over relations between humans and of their ability to see each other as human, as sharing values, as beholden to other more inclusive sources of authority.

'Sit-In': Television and Non-Violent Imagery Combine to Create a New America

Juliet E. K. Walker has indicated that the Civil Rights Era constituted a watershed, 'third wave' moment for African-American business as it was during that stint of black capitalist growth was first 'viewed as joining mainstream American business activity.'[615] 'Sit In,' an NBC documentary piece for their 1960 *White Paper* series, focused on the non-violent protests of segregated Nashville, Tennessee lunch counters, a strategy which was highly provocative as it smacked loudly of social interaction and equality, a strict taboo in the South's vision of black public behavior.[616] Sasha Torres has discussed 'Sit In' in terms of its effect on the television industry in general, its ability to galvanize the black community, and in terms of the documentary's use of 'flashback' narrative strategies.[617] I would like to provide a brief close read of portions of 'Sit In' in order to address the show's handling of presentations and promotions of black humanity by way of the program's text and visual approaches, a strategy used to further assimilationist messages.

Stuart Hall has approached the question of a viewer's interaction with or reading of the object of its television viewership by considering three different perspectives which

[615] Juliet E. K. Walker, 'White Corporate America: The New Arbiter of Race?,' Kenneth Lipartito and David B. Sicilia, (eds.), *Constructing Corporate America: History, Politics, Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 246-293.
[616] Ibid., pp. 36-47.
[617] Ibid.

are based on the social positioning and experiences of the audience member.[618] The messages of any given television (or film) production consists of information encoded into the text and the message calculated by the producers, which is also often likely to be the home base of the mainstream, is referred to as the dominant or 'preferred' reading. The preferred readings can be expected to come from those whose social location is most closely associated with the dominant ideology. However, the viewer always 'decodes' the narrative according to their own perspective. Viewers who are situated differently may produce a 'negotiated' reading by taking into account a non-dominant point of view that works to vary the meaning of the overall text without necessarily conflicting with the entirety of the preferred reading. A third family of readings, the 'oppositional' reading, occurs when the viewer's social position and interpretation is at odds with the dominant viewing.[619]

NBC knew that 'Sit-In' revolved around highly contentious issues of race and integration which would be read differently in different sections of the country. Torres has noted that the television industry as a whole was attempting to build a national reach that could encompass as many households as possible, a goal that meant they wanted to sell advertising time based on a viewership that included whites and blacks from all sectors.[620] NBC therefore had an interest in a story angle that would isolate and negatively frame segregationist attitudes that wanted to enforce upon a national broadcasting scheme

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[618] Stuart Hall, 'Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse,' Vol. 7. Centre for Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1973.
[619] Ibid.
[620] Sasha Torres, *Black White, and in Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 26.-28.

prohibitions against images that included blacks in normative circumstances. These were goals sufficiently similar to those of the Civil Rights Movement to lead to a kind of partnership or alliance between the television industry and the protestors, a shared base of values and interests that had not existed between Hollywood and Negro film producers or workers, including actors during the Progressive Era.[621] The result was that the dominant, preferred reading of 'Sit In' coincided with a reading that a non-dominant group also desired. The text, imagery, sounds, and editing of 'Sit In' were intended to not only forward the position of the broadcast company and, to important degrees, the protestors, but also to influence the way the program was viewed and decoded in hopes that the preferred message would not be overly negotiated or opposed, to use Hall's terms.

The protestors of Nashville held the goal of wining recognition for black humanity as a chief aspect of their strategy and they said as much in overt terms. Such was not the end goal but instead a means. Consider the following quote from one Negro protester explaining the anticipated effects of their non-violent methods:

> When you go to a counter you do not request that the person sitting next to you get up and leave. You merely come in and sit down beside him as any human being would do. It sort of helps to project the idea that 'here sits beside me another human being.[622]

'Sit In' demonstrated from it's very first frames that it was to be a highly mediated event which intended to get at a shared humanity between back and white via a supposed

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[621] Torres, *Black White, and in Color*, p. 26.
[622] 'Sit In' can be viewed at various placed on the Internet. I watched the program at 'NBC News Special: White Paper Sit In,' *NBC Universal Archives*, http://www.nbcuniversalarchives.com/nbcuni/clip/51A02201_s01.do;

verite which put the viewer in the position of the program's protagonists.[623] The first images were of a young black man walking down a street. The camera was positioned so that the audience's view was that of someone walking next to the subject. The viewer's eyes, if not their mindset, were immediately made partners in the protest and this continued as the voiceover from a protester, matter-of-fact and only slightly modulated in tone, describes the onset of his involvement:

> It was on February 13th and we had the very first sit-in here in Nashville, and I took my seat at the counter. I asked the waitress for a hamburger and a coke.[624]

The imagery throughout that narrative provided the audience with the protestor's point of view, meaning the camera established the setting by approaching the front of the protest site, McClellan's diner, and going right up to the door and then to the counter where, as the narration mentions the waitress, the image edits to a close pan up of that person, a middle-aged white woman, following her body through the last of the protestor's above statement and coming to a stop on her face which, filling the screen, comes to life just as the protestor's above quote ends.

> I said "I'm Sorry, Our management does not allow us to serve niggers in here."[625]

The film was cut so that the waitress' response, a 'flashback' like the protestor's account, came a conversational beat after the young black man has placed his order and thereby created a sense that the viewer had been carried back to the moment of the protest's

[623] Ibid.
[624] Ibid.
[625] Ibid.

inception and was personally receiving the rebuff. The central underlying strategy of 'Sit-In' was quickly set: the protest would be shown to consist of 'unobjectionable' daily actions enjoyed by most of the population (which was then silently edited into place next to images of more conventional forms of protest such as the picket line), and the audience would then be loaned the anti-segregationist protestor's point of view to promote a shared experience, a position from which the audience then saw the segregationists.

Time after time the camera took up the protestor's point of view as the camera 'walked' among a group of blacks on their way to the counters or 'circled' in the picket line. The point-of-view shots were augmented by 'flashback' imagery of interviews taken after the fact that provided insight into the on-scene footage and thereby helped to sculpt the meaning of the images from the protest. Michael Curtin has noted that documentary television, even film, often borrows from the narrative techniques employed by the larger commercial film industry, most notably Hollywood, and the flashbacks were one such technique used to add authority to the over all story.[626]

One of the most interesting uses of POV camera work interspersed with flashback interviews comes when a young white man recounts his time on the picket line outside one of the stores being sat-in. He begins by telling the audience that he had been putting his change into the meter, which sets him out as a law-abiding citizen behaving as most anyone would, when 'suddenly' he finds that he has 'moved into a different world' populated by angry segregationists shouting 'niggers go home.'[627] He asserted that the

[626] Michael Curtin, *Redeeming the Wasteland: Television Documentary and Cold War Politics* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 187.
[627] 'NBC News Special: White Paper Sit In,' *NBC Universal Archives*.

only moral option was to join those picketing against segregation and took up a sign. Shortly thereafter he realized that the angry white men who supported the compulsory separation of the races were thinking about attacking him for crossing the racial divide. An edit to a different young white male followed, his depravity demonstrated by his protruding teeth and the bars of his jail cell. The conflation of class and moral failing were there pitted against putatively poor whites in this instance. The incarcerated subject indicated in a brief clip from a flashback interview that he had decided to strike at the young anti-segregationist 'because he was white and taking up for the niggers.'[628] The producers of 'Sit-In' were blatantly presenting the hooligan in an unsympathetic light and maintained the air of objectivity by allowing the incarcerated protestor of protestor to utter seemingly voluntary statements of his own mind. The POV camera angle then took over the picture and the man from the jail was shown on the picket line glowering and approaching the circling camera. The thug re-appears for a beat, recounting from his cell that he indeed struck the other young man, and the next image is from a generic picketers POV as we see the young man on the ground, holding his neck. His voiceover and flashback narrative inform the audience of his emotional state and the way the experience of being attacked without just cause transported his personal on-site perspective:

> I suddenly felt the tremendous humiliation. Suddenly I had crossed into another race. I had moved into a different world. I was a Negro feeling all of the rejection and humiliation he must have to go through every time he's rejected.[629]

[628] Ibid.
[629] Ibid.

The intended effect of this recollection and revelation of whiteness succumbing to the forces of likeness and thereby momentarily transforming into blackness was the establishment of identification with the anti-segregationist, the assumption being that a significant aspect of the social, cultural, and economic distances between the races was locked up in a lack of shared experience and perspective. The POV shots and narrative voice-overs were expected to fill that void with a remedial burst of information that would help the parties see each other differently. It should be noted here that it was just as important that blacks see that whites were capable of seeing blacks as they saw themselves as it was for whites to begin to see as blacks saw.

There were other narrative attempts to storytell the move from a white to black perspectives that surfaced at about the time 'Sit-In' aired. The most widely known was John Howard Griffin's book, *Black Like Me*, which followed the writer's medically-induced change from white- to dark-skinned and chronicled the ways the alteration in his pigmentation brought him into blackness and altered the nature and quality of his interactions with self and others.[630] *Black Like Me*, the segment of 'Sit-In' being discussed at present, and other such accounts of passing from the dominant to subaltern racial experiences, are fraught with various logical narrows or dead ends that made their usefulness for the peoples of their era limited. For instance, Baz Dreisinger addressed the fact that *Black Like Me* tried to occupy the several social spaces afforded by the passage from whiteness to blackness: those of the white, the black, and the middling ground of being black in spaces wherein his primary response was to recall what it had been like to

[630] John Howard Griffith, *Black Like Me* (San Antonio, Texas: Wings Press, 1960 (2004)).

be white in said spaces.[631] The critique here is that, with so many memories of whiteness, and the knowledge that the author would be able to return to whiteness, there can be no real understanding of the black experience which affords no such outs. However, as Dreisinger noted regarding Griffin's return to whiteness, the author remained a person whose perspective had shifted as he could not simply forget his 'black' experiences.[632]

In spite of Griffin's inability to fully meld self and other, as an example of efforts to overcome problems of 'proximity and space,' which Dreisinger referred to as the 'crux of the racial struggle in 1950s America,' efforts at taking on the position of the subaltern allowed perspectives privileged by preference or dominance to begin to imagine and integrate what they believed to be examples of the experiences of others. Such stories of inhabited likeness formed part of a basis from which to move forward with increased awareness, reconceived definitions of race and difference, and a recognition of the humanity of the other.[633] Those changes worked as part of a broader project aimed at growing opportunities for cross-racial cooperation and the undermining of those aspects of racist power that traditionally prohibited such interactions. For the producers of 'Sit-In' changing interactions involved promoting a reduction of the perceived divisions between the races so that disparate responses based on race could be mitigated and the available pool of customers rationalized.

As in the case of the imagery brought to bear by the story of Bayard Rustin's dragooning, which is to say the story of Bayard Rustin bringing about his dragooning, 'Sit-

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[631] Baz Dreisinger, *Near Black: White-to-Black Passing in American Culture* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), pp. 50-59.
[632] Ibid., p. 55.
[633] Ibid., p. 53.

In' repeatedly captured the segregationist response to provocation by centering the audiences attention on segregationist violence and the resultant suffering of anti-segregationists both black and white. In addition to the already noted instance of the young white man being beaten for 'taking up' a black cause, the attempts of segregationist's to provide the audience with the southern perspective received cross-cut editing which neutralized those attempts to portray segregation as harmless or an example of the exercise of family and community prerogatives all members of society shared. When such sentiments were expressed, along with sometimes profoundly convoluted and inarticulate bids to benignly express the natural roots of the desire to keep the races separate, not only were those images intercut with the opinions of other southern whites who disagreed, but the interviews of the segregationists trailed off into voice overs that continued to vent racist ideals while the image on screen was changed to segregationists at the sit-in site erecting scaffolds and hanging both white and black anti-segregationist effigies.[634]

By again showing blacks and whites together suffering violence or the threat of violence for adhering to the preferred position, 'Sit-In' largely denied the segregationist position the cover of a reading that acknowledged their requests to be seen in a universal light. The documentary and its protagonists set out to make room for the cultural and political clout of those southern whites willing to forego segregation and conflating black and white humanity in order to undercut the authorial power of race forwarded those designs on alliances of sympathy and shared values. Establishing segregationists in the

[634] 'NBC News Special: White Paper Sit In,' *NBC Universal Archives*.

role of the violent, abhorrent, and incomprehensible villain was central to such a divide and conquer stratagem and, what is more, the exclusion of more radical and potentially divisive branches of the Civil Rights Movement were also banished to the outskirts of the discussion and its supporting visuals.[635]

Public imagery of the grotesque aftermath of white supremacist violence in the South was an important aspect of the Civil Rights Movement as it forced the nation to deal with the negative corollary of black humanity, racist inhumanity visited upon black bodies. Perhaps the most ground-shaking example of using the violence visited upon black bodies in order to expose the horrifying world view of American racism involved Emmett Till, a 13-year old African America from Chicago who, while visiting his family in Mississippi, was lynched for allegedly addressing a white woman improperly.[636] Sasha Torres has argued that the decision by Emmett Till's mother to make certain that her son's tortured and misshapen body was displayed publicly in state and via the media, most notably in *Jet* magazine, constituted the practical invention of the 'strategy that later became the SCLC's (Southern Christian Leadership Council) signature gesture: literally *illustrating* southern atrocity with images of black physical suffering, and disseminating those images nationally.'[637]

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[635] J. Fred MacDonald, 'Actualities and Blacks in TV: The Early 1960s,' *Blacks and White TV: African Americans in Television since 1948* (J. Fred MacDonald, 2009), http://jfredmacdonald.com/bawtv/bawtv8.htm.
[636] Stephen J. Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988.
[637] Sasha Torres, *Black White, and in Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 26.

Torres noted that the SCLC's Executive Director, Wyatt Walker, understood fully the usefulness these images of Negro pain at the hands of a foil and he celebrated when local actors like Theophilus Eugene 'Bull' Connor, the Commissioner of Public Safety over the Birmingham Police during the SCLS's 1963 civil rights campaign in that city, obliged the cameras by loosing his attack dogs and fire hoses on peacefully demonstrating blacks. Walker wanted most to present to the nation the unbalanced fury of the foil, a demonstration of the ugliness and inhumanity that was beneath the veneer of southern gentility and its claims over the well being of the Negro. To that end, when Connor was initially judicious about his use of violence, especially in front of the cameras, Walker was disappointed and not above provocation.[638] What is more, lest there be any mistake about the mutuality of the manipulations which took place between the movement and the television, Wyatt as often as possible scheduled protest activities at times which would allow the broadcasting companies, then shooting on film, to get the footage delivered to their home offices in time for the news.[639]

Allison Graham's *Framing the South*, her excellent treatment of the portrayal of the South in Hollywood and on television, establishes that the mas media had a ready stable of stereotyped roles for southern whites which was very much the match for those drawn up as representations of the nation's blacks.[640] One of the most ubiquitous types was the ill-tempered, ignorant hillbilly, quick to fight and reticent to accept modernity's offerings.

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[638] Ibid.
[639] Torres, *Black White, and in Color*, p. 26.
[640] Allison Graham, *Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race During the Civil Rights Struggle* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

Graham notes was described by on observer of the form as of 'limited ability to achieve.[641] In short, much of the nation on the whole was primed during the 1960s to receive characterizations of the southern white as backwards and dangerous. When the protestors of the Civil Rights Movement were set upon by lawless mobs, such was sometimes a lifting of the curtain and in many other instances merely corroboration.

But Graham also notes that the South was not a solid block regarding these outbursts of savagery and she brought up the fact that many Mississippians were shocked and dismayed by the murder of Till.[642] The young Chicagoan's murderers, admittedly comfortable enough to claim their bloodletting in a nationally published article in *Look* magazine, were somewhat turned around by the fact that many who initially praised their ghastliness soon about faced and would not interact with them as renters or people.[643] Those bared cracks of a fissile South arose with the condemnations that came from the visibility of the horror and the light white supremacist animalism reflected on black humanity.

Joan Dayan, in commenting on Frantz Fanon's downgrade of a dominant white recognition of blacks that comes without conflict and battle, noted that 'no full consciousness of self' could come from such an interaction.[644] The suggestion here is that the gulfs of power and class cannot breed true recognition unless the violence that underwrites the involved power differential becomes the language of the oppressed and

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[641] Ibid., p. 118.
[642] Ibid., p. 119.
[643] Ibid.
[644] Joan Dayan, 'Paul Gilroy's Slaves, Ships, and Routes: The Middle Passage as Metaphor,' *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 27, No. 4, Winter 1996, pp. 7-14, p.10.

receives expression in a way that the dominant culture is forced to understand. I would argue that the efficacy of demands that black humanity be recognized, especially when undertaken with 'non-violent' methods that transformed perpetrators of racist atrocity into foils, was notable and supports a reading of non-violence as a strategy of aggression. The violence that actions like those captured in 'Sit-In' did to the fabric of Post-War segregationist aims is all too easily missed in many accounts of the history of the Civil-Rights movement. However, if we consider a quote from a middle-aged white woman interviewed for 'Sit-In,' we can see that there were whites who, in facing their own marginalization under the American Gaze, grasped the precise tearing at the racialized structures of public non-egalitarian modes involved with the movement. The woman stated 'I think that people who strive to gain social acceptance through their…although they call it "non-violent" or "passive" resistance, they're the most violent.'[645] This indicates that the recognition being won by blacks through non-violent demands for the recognition of their humanity was not simply a sop dripped from white dominance in the guise of acknowledgement. Rather, it was a world-view changing strategy that shrank the spaces wherein the segregation of the day was tolerated and perpetrated.

Though Torres indicated that Mamie Till may have been the first to nationally project images of Negro suffering in a propagandistic fashion in order to make unmistakable the stakes African Americans had at risk, and without attempting to reduce the still towering courage that the mother of the slain youth demonstrated in using the unvarnished reality of her loss to campaign for justice, it must be noted for the purposes of this dissertation

[645] 'NBC News Special: White Paper Sit In,' *NBC Universal Archives*.

that the Lincoln Motion Picture Company mined similar veins of representation during their initial push to establish the company and its approach. *The Trooper of Troop K*, a fictionalization of a true event that involved the sacrifice of black bodies in a hail of machine gun fire, constitutes one of the earliest instances of adapting the imagery of the spillage of Negro blood in the service of sowing national seeds of a recognition of black humanity. As previously noted, the foil in several of the Lincoln photoplays were the Mexican characters, especially in *Trooper*, whose foreign otherness combined with villainy or incompetence to elevate black claims on American-ness, citizenship, and values shared with whites.

The above crystalizes both that the LMPC was both ahead of its time and at the forefront of a technological revolution regarding the combination of moving picture imagery and representations of black humanity and American-ness meant to build cultural, political, and economic partnership with white America. That pioneering position can be seen as having helped to bear the fruit of the Civil Rights Era's use of televised images coming from inside the battle zones. If we look at the LMPC and the race film industry as a loosely fitted analogue to the Civil Rights Movement we can see that the push for democratization that followed the First World War, and helped to spark new levels of intensity in black resistance to second-class citizenship, was forced to receive a marked upgrade in the aftermath of the Second World War as the odiousness of the Nazism's racist credos and genocidal activities made racist attitude in the United States even less ignorable.

Michael Klarman, a scholar of constitutional law, has argued that the legal turnaround from *Lum v. Rice*, which in 1927 upheld segregation in public schools, to *Brown v. Board of Education*, which effectively reversed that policy in 1954, was made up of a multiplicity of factors that accrued over the course of the several decades between those decisions.[646] Klarman itemized the nation's Cold War re-evaluation of the treatment of blacks as a factor that added to the disgust for Nazi racism, both being instances wherein I would say a foreign foil provided the American white populace with an impetus to begin to broaden their perception of interests and values shared with the nation's blacks.[647] He also pointed out that the nation had seen over the preceding decades the increases in black economic clout that much of our discussion of the LMPC entailed and a growth in economic and social integration in middle class lives.[648]

For Klarman the decision in *Brown* was a culmination built upon currents of change that were so strong and pervasive that the decision itself was mostly important as an incitement to far-right forces of southern backlash which produced the kinds of atrocities that the Civil Rights Organizations and the national media pounced on to great effect.[649] Though the business endeavors of Noble and George Johnson were relatively short-lived and only profitable on small scales, as those businesses were nonetheless important as the point of generation for mass produced images and stories of a new blackness within a new

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[646] *Gong Lum v. Rice*, 275 U.S. 78 (1927); *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954); Michael J. Klarman, '*Brown*, Racial Change, and the Civil Rights Movement,' *Virginia Law Review*, Vol. 80, No. 1, 1994, pp. 7-150.
[647] Klarman, '*Brown*, Racial Change, and the Civil Rights Movement,' *Virginia Law Review*, p. 14.
[648] Ibid.
[649] Ibid.

America, and those stories must be seen as part of the bedding in which the changes that favored *Brown* and the Civil Rights Movement were rooted. For that reason the place that the LMPC has within the history of pressing for the recognition of black humanity as a priming strategy for political and legal action must be accounted for when we look at the importance of the Johnson's business endeavors.

Conclusions

George Johnson lived out the five decades of his life that followed the end of the Pacific Coast News Bureau in relative obscurity and silence. He would retire from the Postal Service in Los Angeles and continue to curate and collect for his files on black culture that gave rise to the PCNB. That collection has been invaluable for numerous studies on various topics connected with African-American life, especially that connected with blacks in film. George died in Los Angeles, California on October 17, 1977, just two weeks short of his 92nd birthday. Several months later, in the San Bernadino area, Noble passed away on January 9, 1978, at the age of 96. He had last made a movie in 1950 and thereafter had been completely out of the public eye.

The study of the businesses of the Johnson brothers can easily be absorbed as attention paid to a bevy of small, ephemeral entrepreneurial undertakings sporting very modest structural or organizational innovations that were then abandoned once profitability or growth became untenable. Though the Lincoln Motion Picture Company was put together by men who intended to build the endeavor into a lasting a financially powerful corporation leading the black race into a 20th Century of vast opportunities for black economic growth, the results were a small business which failed to accrete enough

financial wherewithal to create the types of large organizational and structural footprints that tend to loom most prominently in the business histories that follow Alfred Chandler's model of studying enterprise by focusing on mammoth, multi-departmental concerns and the far-reaching influence that their managerial stewards wield.[650]

The Johnsons wanted to follow the example of the Hollywood frenzy of verticality that gave rise to powerful corporate entities that dominated the industry while exerting considerable cultural influence at the same time. As we have seen, though the Johnsons endeavored to break out of commercial pathways that detoured them into the low-ceiling markets of the nation's segregated black communities, the detour dominated their businesses distribution web and relegated the Lincoln Motion Picture Company to a customer base that could not support the kind cash-hungry, labor-intensive enterprise they chose. The study of the LMPC and the other sideline businesses the Johnsons undertook is not one attuned to momentous successes or lasting corporations which continue to extend their hold of power.

However, limiting ourselves to a view of business history that is concerned only with behemoths would lead us to miss out on the types of cultural and economic change that entrepreneurs produce when engaged in commerce at the many other levels of interplay that make up the business world. The financial successes or failures of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company and the Pacific Coast New Bureau are of interest and this dissertation has provided new insight into the details of the limits of race-based business models and Progressive Era hopes within the hearts of some black elites regarding the prospects of

[650] Arthur D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (New York: Belknap, 1977 (1993)).

partnering with white money to create successful business across a wide array of commercial fields. While the Johnsons were able to create improvements in their financial status by working with whites or seeking white sponsorship, those interactions tended to be on the level of individual relations that were not sufficient in power or scope to effect the overall social, cultural, and economics practices of the era in ways which created consistent spaces for growth beyond the paths of detour. Similarly, racial ambiguity, especially those physical characteristics which tended to intimate proximity to whiteness and the dominant culture, could create a wider range of middle class opportunities for those members of the black community, but for Noble and George Johnson the shadow of the veil remained over them and they were not employed to the full extent of their abilities once the LMPC was shut down.

Though African Americans went to the movies with regularity and presented a market that the Hollywood firms came to see as profitable, the race business model of trying to attract a loyal customer base could not sustain a race company like the LMPC as the three-tiered film business required access to finances and distribution which the competition commanded but they did not. The positive relationships that the Noble and George had with numerous white individuals were unable to effect the way the industry worked on the whole and, unlike the circumstance the Civil Rights Movement encountered, there was no set of market-driven values that induced cooperation from the powerful whites of the industry. The Johnson story shows that attempting to do business on a national basis did help to establish a cross-country circuitry of black business and culture which sustained the population but often struggled to adequately grow the businesses servicing that sector.

Without full access to full markets the film company could not even attract meaningful financing form race firms, which suggests that there were limited opportunities for growth within the paths of detour available to race banks.

In spite of these tremendous obstacles, the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, and George's Pacific Coast News Bureau were able to effectively spearhead the use of a new technology to address the black community's need to see blackness publicly displayed in positive ways. As I have tended to spotlight the aspects of race and business which involve the dynamics of partnership, alliance, and other sorts of relationship building, the material productions and organizational structures of the businesses have proven a rich source of information about the ways the Johnson businesses processed the social and cultural knowledge of race. The mediums of film and print allowed the brothers to give expression to their ideas of a new image of blackness that, if not truly complete, was nonetheless an important departure on the path of a tradition of using stories and images to make demands that the mainstream acknowledge black humanity.

The stories they told about being black in America often revolved around characters or people erecting lives and lifestyles that were too often considered to be reserved for 'whites.' The Lincoln Films and PCNB releases demonstrate a desire to show blacks and whites that there existed within the black population many of the same values and desires as existed in the middle class realms of the mainstream white world. These stories promoted alliances and partnerships between black and whites while privileging relationships based on alternate sources of authority, such as shared human interests or nationalistic verve, which could outweigh or sideline disqualifying considerations of race.

In that light, Noble's film career and persona, popular within the race and respected without of the race in no small part due to his actual person and history, represented a subjecthood which informed the social and cultural knowledge of race produced by the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, a knowledge that saw in blackness traits, abilities, ambitions, and mastery that required a much broader definition of blackness than was generally available at the time the films were produced. The humanity that the Johnsons promoted in their presentations of a new blackness regularly flitted around the supposed boundary between the races and often attempted to demonstrate that said boundary was mutable if not wholly illusory. As a result, this study sits on the uncomfortable, uneven surface of that part of black identity that, oppositionally defined relative to whiteness, nonetheless admits ambivalence about blackness and the pinch of being held apart from those aspects of humanity which white privilege has had the habit of claiming for itself.

This dissertation's attentive treatment of the straddling act over the divide between black and white in America, in addition to excursions into either side, repeatedly return us to the Johnson brothers' wide-ranging accentuations on mastery. Houston Baker tackled the issue of black types of mastery in his *Modernism in the Harlem Renaissance* which noted both the 'mastery of form,' which allowed black voices to create spaces for expressions of their culture within what might be considered the dominant or preferred forms of the Progressive Era, and 'deformation of mastery,' which held mastery over the realm of the Other, of the indigenous language forms considered grotesque by dominant 'intruders,' but understood and empowered within the spaces on their side of the

'vale/veil.'[651] Baker's insistence on the two different forms of the word 'vale' and 'veil' refer both to the DuBoisian veil, of course, a sort of active line of division between types, and the vale as a space controlled by the indigenous voicings whose assertions of mastery are seen by the dominant as deformed.[652] These interactions with mastery are about managing life in the shadow of the veil.

The mastery of form is a type of masking to disguise intent and content while expressing in the manner of the master class and the Johnsons must be considered as having utilized this form of creative, discursive communication when taking up the latest technologies of film and turning them to the chore of demonstrating a new blackness which flew in the face broadly accepted stereotypes of the race. Noble also practiced the art of hiding in plain sight by allowing much of his Hollywood career to occur without specifying his racial makeup even as his personal masteries of respected skills were made known in order to demonstrate his fitness for the roles he played. Virgel's life of passing, a successful man of the business class in the Jim Crow South, sopping up white privilege, was perhaps the ultimate wearer of the mask. At the same time, Noble and the LMPC advertised his stature in Hollywood, based as it was on multiplicity, as an announcement of star power behind the veil and the ability to take up the mastery of form at will. Such was a deformation of mastery. But the brothers all insisted on access to formal mastery as well, that externalized will to excellence and functional control over a process or set of factors, including the machinations of self as an object of knowledge and work.

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[651] Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 50-51.
[652] Ibid.

Any notion of mastery derived from the American context of the black subaltern striving in an antagonistic world dominated by white power and privilege must necessarily dialogue with the masteries of the slave societies from which so much of American blackness arose. Deforming that mastery, or the concept of mastery in general, nonetheless comes around to admitting that its realm is set off by the veil and exists in what might be considered the negative space of a valley. Hence Dubois' statement in The Souls of Black Folk that he could not simply turn away from the world found on the other side of the veil and George's late-in-life admission that he had never shaken the 'white atmosphere' in which he had been raised.

The mastery that is to be discerned in the stories presented by the Johnson's storytelling ventures was about controlling the self and the implements and tools of well being so as to win greater freedom and personal fulfillment. The Johnsons made the project of storytelling of blackness as it 'really was' one in which claims on the right and ability to partner with and stand by formal mastery meant claiming those parts of themselves that whites tried to color-code as strictly their own. In so doing they took part in both the attempt to establish spaces wherein blacks could thrive and grow while also working the perhaps contradictory path toward a life or identity capable of acting beyond blackness. Brent Hayes Edwards, in discussing international negritude from the earlier decades of the 20th Century, brought up the term *Decalage*, a French expression that describes differences between perspectives and modes of communication that arise as the

result of variances in the social backgrounds of the involved actors.[653] Edwards notes that *Decalage* can refer to either a difference that is less pronounced than at first thought or the reassertion of a prior 'unevenness or diversity' that echoes Stuart Hall's ideas about 'articulation' as a term referencing the 'two-ness' of a joint, both 'a point of separation…and the point of linkage.'[654] All connections pre-suppose separateness. This dissertation demonstrates that at times a blackness that presupposes a separation from that which is putatively white may be an inadequate vehicle for the full humanity of those people known to be black and, further, that the drive to achieve that fuller humanity may take the race away from detour and onto either side of the veil.

The history of black efforts to implement strategies that call for the recognition of black humanity and partnership with sympathetic whites constituted a desire to replace race-based evaluations of blackness with decision and relationships based on shared human values and the ways those values intersected with the nation's democratic and egalitarian ideals. The LMPC and the PCNB were part of growing that tradition across the nation, of keeping that thread of debate alive and prominent. This dissertation compared the experiences of the LMPC with those of the Civil Rights Movement Organizations and considered the background behind the government actions on behalf of egalitarian ideals such as the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Those inquiries suggests that, rather than outgrowing the need to have black humanity recognized, the storytelling traditions behind such demands not only informed the strategies on the Civil Rights groups and the

[653] Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 13.
[654] Ibid., pp. 13-15;

networks with which they worked, but also took part in laying the social and cultural groundwork that presaged *Brown*. The ongoing flicker of the idea that black lives are made up of values and ambitions and endeavors that go beyond blackness, that are 'black and more than black,' make the Johnsons' story, from Colorado to California to Arkansas, and their storytelling ventures an important one which enhances our understanding of the meaning of black business during the Progressive Era and its play into the history of black humanity.

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